

Secret of the **HAUNTED HOTEL**



From the author of *The Enchanted, Inc. Series*

SHANNA SWENDSON

Secret of the Haunted Hotel

Shanna Swendson

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Chapter One

The bells on the door jingled, and I looked up to see perhaps the strangest person who'd ever entered the newspaper office—and in Stirling Mills, Texas, that was really saying something. Well, no, actually they were pretty good at hiding the weirdness here. Everything *looked* fairly normal. The weird lay beneath the surface of the idyllic little town. This woman, on the other hand, waved her freak flag proudly.

Her ample figure was draped in layers of black. There was lace, there was tulle, there may have been some silk in there, too. It was as though Miss Havisham had fallen into a vat of black dye. Around her shoulders was draped a velvet cloak that wasn't really appropriate to the weather. It may have been the end of October, but it was warm and muggy.

The woman's hair had fallen victim to the same vat of black dye, and it stood in stark contrast to her white skin. Her pallor probably came from a combination of the parasol she'd furled upon entering the office and the heavy makeup that didn't do her a lot of favors as it highlighted the lines around her mouth and eyes. Since it was the Friday before Halloween, I couldn't be sure whether or not the outfit was a costume.

The visitor paused just inside the doorway while she scanned the office. She then stepped briskly toward the desk across the room from me, apparently assuming that the older woman was the boss and I was a mere assistant. She flicked her wrist, and a business card appeared in her hand, like a playing card in a magic act. "Sirena Midnight, Sirena's Spirited Sojourns," she announced,

handing the card to Charlene Robinson, my assistant.

Charlene shot me an amused glance across the office as she took the card. “How may I help you?”

“I’m here for the opening of the Hilltop House, reviewing it for my site, and since I understand that the house is haunted, I thought I’d stop by the newspaper office on my way there to learn what I can about the house’s history. It’s important to prepare myself. You see, I am quite sensitive to those who are visiting us from the other realm. As part of my lifestyle blogging for the sensitive and spiritual, I review travel destinations for those who are looking to commune with spirits.”

Both Charlene and I had to struggle to keep from laughing because this supposedly sensitive person didn’t seem to have noticed the ghost that was standing right next to her. “Sensitive, are you?” Jean Jacobs said. She leaned so that her face was inches from Sirena’s and said, “Boo!” The visitor didn’t so much as blink. Charlene had a coughing fit, politely covering her mouth with her hand to hide her grin. I had it easier, since the woman’s back was facing me and she couldn’t see my expression.

“I don’t know about any hauntings there,” Charlene said with a shrug. “The house hasn’t been occupied full-time in decades.”

“Because of the ghosts?” Sirena asked hopefully.

“Because the people who owned that land lived in Dallas and managed the ranch remotely. They only used the house for weekend stays.”

“That house does have a history,” Jean said, coming over to lean against my desk—well, hover near it, since she didn’t actually touch it. “I covered that story, and I’ll never forget it. There was quite a notorious murder that happened there during the thirties.”

“I’ve read about a case involving that house in the newspaper archives,” I said. Sirena finally turned to acknowledge me. “Lexie Lincoln, editor,” I said with a sweet smile, probably enjoying Sirena’s moment of discomfort a little too much as she realized that her assumption about who the boss was had been inaccurate.

“There was a rather notorious murder that happened there in the thirties.”

“The family who lived there was murdered by a drifter they’d given food and shelter,” Jean said. I relayed that. “It was a couple and their teenaged daughter. They were known for being generous. There were hobo signs on their gate indicating that this was a place you could get a hot meal and a night’s sleep in the barn, maybe even a job on the ranch. Most of the people who came through were merely down on their luck and grateful for the kindness, until one day someone meaner crossed their path. A ranch hand found the family dead in the parlor, stabbed to death, and a drifter was later found in town, trying to hop a freight train, with a bloody shirt in his knapsack.”

I had to concentrate to keep telling the tale instead of focusing on Jean because I’d never seen her like this. She usually played the tough girl reporter, right out of an old screwball comedy, but I could see her going back in time to that incident, having to cover what must have been a shocking crime in this seemingly sleepy town.

“There have been rumors about ghosts out there, of course,” Jean continued. “Some say the family now regrets their hospitality and tries to drive out any visitors. There were several different owners before the people from Dallas bought it.” She paused, allowing me to catch up in telling the story to Sirena. “But that wasn’t the first death associated with that house. It was already rumored to be haunted by then. The couple who built it died in a flash flood when they were washed off the road on their way to town. Their bodies were never found. Their son had stayed home because he hadn’t finished his schoolwork, and he lived the rest of his life in that house, alone except for a guardian while he was still a child, before dying young.” She shook her head sadly. “Poor Arthur. They suspected suicide, but he wasn’t found for a long time, so they couldn’t be sure. Supposedly, he’s still there. Some even said that he was the one who drove the drifter to kill that

family. Or he might have scared the drifter away, and that's why he ran instead of holing up in the house."

"Ooh," Sirena said, shivering with delight. "Well, with my sensitivity, I'm sure I'll be able to communicate with the ghosts and set the record straight." Behind her, Charlene had another coughing fit as Jean circled Sirena, waving her arms for attention. "That is, after all, why I was invited."

Here, I actually knew something, since I'd interviewed the house's new owners about their plans to turn the old ranch house outside the town into a bed and breakfast. They were hoping to capitalize on its haunted reputation to draw guests who wanted to stay in a haunted house, which must have been why someone like Sirena had been invited to the grand opening. I thought it was a fairly clever marketing scheme. There weren't too many reasons why anyone would want to come to the middle of nowhere in north-central Texas, so I doubted there would be a lot of customers for an ordinary inn, but if they played up the haunted angle, then they might attract people who came just for that. Thus the grand opening on Halloween weekend.

"I do know that the last owners had been planning to turn the house into an inn," I said, "but their work crews kept quitting because of strange things happening, like their tools and lunches disappearing. The owners ran out of money and sold."

"I thank you for the history lesson," Sirena said. "And now I'm off to experience the inn for myself. I wanted to arrive early to absorb the vibrations before the other guests arrive. Will I be seeing you there this evening?"

"I'm coming to the party," I said.

"Then I bid you good day." With a flourish and a swirl of her cloak, she swept out.

When she was out of sight, Charlene finally released the laugh that had been building up all that time. She howled with mirth, then had to catch her breath and dab a tissue at the tears streaming down her face. "Oh my!" she finally gasped. "Wasn't she

something?”

“So sensitive to spirits that she didn’t notice the one trying to make her notice,” Jean said with a huff. “What a piece of work.”

Although I was amused by a self-proclaimed “sensitive” who was oblivious to a ghost right in front of her, I couldn’t laugh. I was too troubled for that. It must have shown on my face because Jean said, “What’s up, kiddo? Didn’t you think it was funny?”

“Yeah, but I’m worried about what this party is going to be like. I’m sure they’ve invited other people who can supposedly see ghosts so they can get on the radar of all the haunting tourists.”

“So it’ll be that much more entertaining for you, since you really can see ghosts.”

“But that’s the problem. It means I’ll know who’s a fraud and who isn’t, and I’ll know if the place really is haunted. But I’m not there to expose whether or not the inn is haunted or whether any of these ghost hunters are frauds. I’m just there to cover the opening of a local business that may bring visitors to our area to help support the local economy. I’m afraid that whatever I write is going to end up being a lie. Ironically, if I write the truth, it could destroy my credibility as a journalist. I can’t exactly do a story in which I definitively state that there are or are not any ghosts there without admitting that I see ghosts.” I had a vision of a future in which I was another Sirena, though more genuine, forced to write about ghosts because no one would take me seriously as a reporter.

“If you’re not there to report on ghosts, then don’t report on them,” Jean said with a shrug. “Write about the people who came to the party, maybe what they experienced. You managed to do that story on the haunted restaurant.”

That story was what had landed me this job, since being able to talk to ghosts is a job requirement when the person running things is a ghost. I hadn’t known it at the time, but apparently what I’d written had made it obvious to those in the know that I’d really seen ghosts at that restaurant. “That was different,” I said. “I didn’t know I was really seeing ghosts then. And they weren’t as clear to

me. Talking to you all the time seems to have made me more sensitive, so I see ghosts a lot more clearly. I can't just report on hearing strange sounds when I've actually had a conversation."

"Write it as though you're not an eyewitness, as though you're interviewing people who were there and didn't see anything for yourself."

"Maybe," I said, still not feeling great about it. I couldn't send Charlene in my place, since she had the same talent. Plus, I'd promised my friend Margarita, who was catering the party, that I'd be there to help her set up.

"You'll do fine," Charlene said with a warm smile. "You've managed to write lots of articles about situations involving ghosts." That was true.

"And I'll be editing what you write, so I can help you fix it," Jean added.

"Of course," I said, feeling a bit better. "I just hope they're not all as bad as that one."

THE SECOND THOUGHTS returned as I waited for Margarita to pick me up later that afternoon. "I hate to leave you here alone to handle Trick-or-Treat on Main," I told Charlene.

"I'm not alone," she said, gesturing toward her husband Royce, who stood on a stepladder, hanging fake spiderwebs. "We'll be fine. Trust me, we have years of experience in handing out candy to kids." She was dressed as Princess Leia in a long white gown, with fake buns pinned on the sides of her head. Her husband's Chewbacca costume lay nearby on a chair. "I just hope the rain holds off until the kids have had a chance to make the rounds."

A glance out the window showed a sky that did look a bit threatening. It was still sunny in town, but there were dark clouds to the west.

"According to the weather report, it should be fine while the little ones are out, but it'll probably start raining before dark, when the older kids come out," Royce said, making his way down from

the stepladder. "That's okay by me. The little ones are cuter. The game tonight is the real question mark."

"Do they call football games for rain?" I asked.

"Not for normal rain, but they will if there's lightning."

A van with Margarita's restaurant logo painted on the side pulled up in front of the newspaper office, and I said, "Well, I'll leave you to it. Good luck."

"Have fun," Charlene said. "And y'all shouldn't stay out too late if it rains a lot. The creek out there sometimes runs over the road when there's a flash flood. Margarita should know better than to drive through water, but you could get stuck out there."

"It won't be that bad, will it?" I asked.

"Could be," Royce said with a shrug. "It's a ninety percent chance of rain, with a possibility of severe weather."

"Someone's addicted to the Weather Channel," Charlene said, rolling her eyes.

I couldn't help but glance at the clouds as I headed out to Margarita's van. A drastic cold front had stranded me in town for days when I came to interview for the job, so I wasn't inclined to trust the weather around here. Those clouds were pretty dark. A good thunderstorm would add to the ambience of the party, but I didn't want to get stuck in the middle of nowhere.

On the sidewalk in front of the office, I nearly ran into a police officer. Wes Mosby was tall, auburn-haired, and threw me off-balance—and not just physically. Still, I couldn't resist teasing him. "Oh! A police officer!" I enthused, as though I was talking to a child. "You look like the real thing. If you go in the office, Miss Charlene has some candy for you."

He didn't take the bait. He merely smiled and asked, "The good candy?"

"For you? Sure."

"You're heading out?" he asked, nodding toward Margarita's van. "Not sticking around for the event?"

"Alas, duty calls. I'm covering the grand opening of Hilltop

House.”

“That’s why you’re all spiffed up and not in costume.” He gave me what felt like an appreciative look. I wasn’t too dressed up. I wore a simple “day to evening” type dress with a fitted black blazer over it, but it was a bit nicer than I usually dressed.

“I guess you’re working this event, doing the Officer Friendly routine,” I said.

“I wish. We’ve got to transfer someone to the county jail, and as the one without kids, I’m doing it so no one else has to miss going around with their kids. I was just heading to the office to pick up the paperwork.”

“Your day sounds less fun than mine.”

“Probably. Well, have fun. And be careful on the drive back if it’s raining. The road out there tends to flood.”

“So I’ve heard.”

I waved and went around to the passenger seat of the van, which smelled like enchiladas and chili con queso. I’d be starving by the time we got there. “All set?” Margarita asked as I buckled in. “Josie’s going to meet us there. I appreciate you riding with me and helping out.”

“I’m glad to help,” I said. “As much time as I spend at your restaurant, I’m practically staff, anyway.”

She pulled out onto the street, then said, “I’m dying to get a look inside that house. I’ve always been fascinated by it and the way it sits on that hill, looming over the valley. Do you think it really is haunted?”

“The owners are counting on it.” I told her about the visitor earlier in the day. Margarita was one of the few people who knew about my talent with ghosts. I was glad she’d be there because I could check with her on what other people were hearing and seeing. That would keep me from reacting to things I shouldn’t notice.

“You don’t sound too enthusiastic.”

“I’m just a bit worried about how I’m going to handle it all,

with me being able to actually see ghosts while I'm surrounded by ghost hunters. If I'm not careful, I could give myself away."

"Would that be too bad?"

"Admitting I could see ghosts would make me sound like a crackpot."

"In Stirling Mills? I think most people already assume that."

"Not the newcomers. And it would make it impossible for me to get a real reporting job anywhere else if I have a reputation as a weirdo."

"Were you planning to leave?"

"Well, no. But you never know what might happen. I haven't even been here a year and I've already nearly been run out of town because of an investigation."

"But then you became the hero of the hour. I don't think you have anything to worry about."

As we drove toward the inn, I could see what they meant about the road flooding. We crossed several creeks—or possibly one really twisty creek several times—and the bridges were barely above the water. It wouldn't take much rain for the road to become impassible. The clouds didn't look quite so ominous as they drew nearer, or perhaps there was less contrast between them and the blue sky because it was now somewhat overcast where I was.

We rounded a bend, and then I could see the house on the hill ahead. It was an old two-story house with a porch across the front and a balcony above over the porch. I could see why Margarita had been fascinated with it. It was the kind of house that stirs imaginations, and it looked like the kind of place you expected to be haunted. "Wow," I said.

"See?" she said. "When I was a kid, I liked to imagine I was a grand lady living there and looking out over all my land. I guess a house that size is too big and expensive to just live in, so they had to make it pay off somehow."

"I don't know. I got the impression they have money. This is just something they've always wanted to do. They're escaping from

the rat race.”

“Getting into the hospitality industry isn’t escaping the rat race,” she said with a snort. “I hope they aren’t in for a big disappointment.”

She turned off the road and crossed a cattle guard to head down a gravel drive that curved up the hill to where the house was. The owners stepped onto the front porch as we pulled up and directed us to go around to the back to unload. We stopped on a paved area near the house’s back door, in front of a detached garage connected to the house by a covered walkway.

I’d talked to the Wheelers on the phone but hadn’t yet met them in person. My first impression of Rick Wheeler was that he had to have been military at some point in his life. He still carried himself like he was in uniform, and his dark, curly hair was cropped short in a military-style cut. My own father had been in the air force, so I recognized the type from having grown up around men like that. His wife, Paige, looked like a Dallas socialite who’d decided she was done with all that. She still had a trim figure and perfectly styled hair, but the hair was a natural gray instead of Dallas blond, and if she wore makeup, it was so expertly applied that it wasn’t obvious. I was pretty sure, though, that the casual outfit she wore was worth more than I earned in a week.

They greeted us as we got out of the van. “Thanks so much for being willing to come out all this way,” Paige said.

“We serve the whole county,” Margarita said. “And I have to admit that I’ve always wanted to see inside this house.”

“Then come on in. I’ll give you the grand tour once you’ve unloaded,” Paige said. “I’ve got a warming oven if you’d like to use that until you’re ready to set up the buffet. It’s about an hour before I’d like to start serving.”

“That’ll be great,” Margarita said. We got out of the van, and I came around to approach the Wheelers.

“Hi, I’m Lexie Lincoln. We spoke on the phone last week.”

They shook my hand. “You don’t moonlight as a caterer, do

you?” Rick asked with a grin.

“I’m just helping Margarita, since her waitress has a late class and will be joining us later.”

Margarita opened the back of the van, and we started taking out trays. Rick jumped in to help. “You ladies don’t have to do that,” he said.

When we had the buffet supplies in the dining room, the cold food in the refrigerator, and the hot food in the warming oven, Paige said, “Now, about that tour. This, obviously, is the kitchen. My concern here was for function rather than style, so the old one was gutted and it doesn’t have any period charm.” It was a thoroughly modern kitchen filled with commercial stainless steel appliances. We passed through swinging doors into the dining room. Now that I had a chance to look instead of just dumping things on the sideboard, I saw that it was arranged more like a restaurant, with a scattering of small tables, than like a family dining room. “We’ll be serving breakfast to our guests here,” Paige said. “The furniture is reproduction, since it was hard to find matching antique tables. The sideboard is original to the house, as is the molding and the chandelier.”

We crossed the wide foyer to the parlor, which was a feminine room full of delicate antique-looking furniture and potted plants. Sirena and another woman sat on sofas, having tea. Sirena set a teacup on the coffee table and stood, coming over to greet us. “Ah, Lexie, good to see you again,” she said. I introduced Margarita, and Sirena gestured to the other woman who was just coming over to join us. She was older, with gently waving silver hair and skin that didn’t look old enough to go with that hair. I couldn’t help but think that if one of the guests was murdered, I’d have competition solving the case, since she was right out of a British murder mystery, the kind of elderly lady who seemed benign but always managed to catch the killer. “This is Carole Carlton,” Sirena said. “She writes a column for one of the big travel magazines. She specializes in haunted vacation locales, so I suppose you could say

we're competitors. Friendly competitors, of course. Right, Carole?"

Carole gave her a thin smile, but the smile she gave Margarita and me was more genuine. "Lovely to meet you," she said. I had to force myself to focus on her because behind her I saw a teenaged girl sitting at a piano, her fingers moving silently over the keyboard. I could see the wallpaper through her, so I figured she wasn't one of the guests.

Now I knew for certain that the house was haunted.

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Chapter Two

My ethical dilemma had just become a lot more complicated.

If I wrote the truth about what I saw and validated anything the ghost hunters claimed they saw, I'd look like I'd fallen into the trap of tabloid journalism, and I'd have trouble getting anyone to take me seriously. If I didn't, I'd be writing something I knew wasn't true. Not that a story about the opening of a new local inn was serious journalism, but I had to be able to live with myself. When I'd written that story about the haunted restaurant, it had been done tongue-in-cheek as a feature. Now I knew too much to approach this situation the same way.

I'd managed to go for years without consciously seeing ghosts. I did often have the weird sense that there was something there, just past the corner of my eye, but I hadn't seen anything that looked like actual people since I was a kid. And then I came to Stirling Mills and met Jean. Once I saw her, I started seeing ghosts everywhere. Supposedly, I was capable of blocking them, and those same blocks were what kept Wes Mosby from being able to easily read my thoughts with his mind-reading talent. I wondered if I could put up that kind of block again, just for tonight. Then I wouldn't have to know whether or not any of the ghost hunters at the party were telling the truth. I could report what they said without my own perspective getting in the way.

The girl at the piano got up and crossed the room to the front window, where she gazed outside. I concentrated on shutting her out, and she vanished. I couldn't tell if I'd actually blocked her from my consciousness or if she'd chosen that moment to

disappear, but for now I could interact with the others without the distraction.

I introduced myself and my position to Carole. “I started my career at a newspaper like that,” she said with a smile. “Of course, that was ages ago. I moved to magazines after that because features were my strength, and there’s less of an opportunity to do that kind of writing on a small-town paper.”

“Sometimes features are all we have on a slow news week,” I said, trying not to cringe. Writing for a respected national magazine wasn’t as scary a potential future as I’d seen with Sirena, but I didn’t want to be the ghost columnist.

Paige continued her tour once we’d run out of small talk. “This is the parlor, of course. Some of the furniture is original to the house, as is the fireplace.” She led us across the room to a sliding door, which she pulled back to reveal another room at the rear of the house. This one had walls lined in books and heavier, more masculine furniture. “Here’s our library. We can open these up to be one big room for functions, or we can have separate rooms so groups of guests can go to their own areas.” We followed her back to the hall, where she pointed out the powder room under the stairs, then up a grand staircase to a hallway wide enough to serve as a room. There were small tables and chairs scattered about the hall, and one of those pod coffee makers sat on a dresser. There was also a mini refrigerator nearby. “This is a common space for guests, with coffee, and there are drinks in the fridge. Feel free to help yourself. When we have guests, we’ll have cookies and other treats here in the afternoon. This space opens to the balcony.” There were glass French doors with lace curtains at that end of the hall.

On my way past the dresser, I couldn’t resist turning the spinner rack full of pods. There were a few different kinds of tea—not my brands of choice, but I appreciated that the Wheelers had made the effort. I moved to the French doors to look out at the balcony. The sky was getting darker. It was only late afternoon, but

it was almost as dark as night. As though reading my thoughts, Paige flipped a light switch, and the overhead chandelier came on, dispelling some of the gloom.

"I can't show you all the guest rooms, since some of them are already occupied," Paige said, "but you can get an idea from this one." She led us into a room in the front corner of the house. It had the kind of four-poster bed and floral wallpaper you'd expect in a historic inn.

"Nice," I said. I glanced out the front window and saw a cloud of dust stirring on the road, heading up the hill. "Looks like your guests are starting to arrive."

"No, I think that's Josie's car," Margarita said, looking over my shoulder. "That's my waitress. She's here just in time to help us set up." To me, she added, "You're now officially off duty." She hurried toward the stairs.

"You've done a great job with the place," I said to Paige.

"Thanks, but most of the work was already done when we bought it. All that was left for us was the cosmetic stuff, like wallpaper, paint, and furnishings. We got to do the fun part. Some of it was hard work, and we did most of it ourselves, but we didn't have to deal with the wiring, plumbing, and all that."

"Then it sounds like the part I can see was all you, and it's lovely."

I heard a shuffling sound above me and fought not to look up. It seemed my block hadn't worked, after all.

But then Paige looked up and sighed. "I think we have squirrels in the attic." There was a heavier thud. "Or maybe raccoons. The sound comes and goes." If Paige heard it, it probably wasn't a ghost, unless it was one that was so active anyone could sense it.

"How many rooms do you have?" I asked.

"There are five guest rooms: the four original bedrooms and the old sleeping porch that's been converted to a bedroom. We live in the caretaker's apartment above the garage, which used to be a carriage house, so the whole main house is strictly an inn."

We got back downstairs to find Josie and Margarita setting up the buffet warmers on a long table. “Is there anything I can do to help?” Paige asked.

“We’ve got it under control,” Margarita said. “You just enjoy your party. What time do you want to have the food out?”

Paige checked her watch. “The guests should start arriving any time now. Let’s go with about six, but if everyone’s here by then, you can get it out a little earlier.”

“Okay. I’ll set out some chips and salsa in case those who are already here want to snack.”

I looked out the window to see a car pulling up in front, and Jordan Randall got out. He was a tech billionaire who’d left Silicon Valley to return to his hometown and was now its biggest booster, but I was a little surprised to see him here. I’d have thought that this place would have been competition for his downtown enterprises. Paige and Rick rushed out the front door and onto the porch to greet him. They escorted him in to the foyer. “Wow, it looks great,” he said. “I’m sure you’ve got a success on your hands.”

“We hope so,” Rick said. “And thanks for all your help.”

“We’re all in this together.” Jordan turned to me. “Hi, Lexie, thanks for coming out for this.”

“It’s the news event of the week,” I said. That was actually true. It was shaping up to be a slow news week.

“Are your other guests here yet?” he asked Paige.

“Just a couple. There are two more groups supposed to be coming in. One of the groups is flying, so I hope they didn’t run into weather delays. The others are driving, but I believe they’re coming in from the east, so they should be okay if they make it soon.”

“I just had a few drops on my windshield,” Jordan said. “But on the radio, they said Dallas is getting hammered. If your guests’ flight hasn’t already landed, they may not make it in this evening.”

“They should have landed by now,” Paige said. “Let’s hope

they're well on their way. Now, come meet the others." She and Rick ushered him to the parlor.

I stayed with Margarita and Josie in the dining room and snagged a tortilla chip.

"Do you think it's true what they say about this place being haunted?" Josie asked.

Margarita shot me a meaningful look as she said, "I have no idea. It depends on whether you believe in that sort of thing. What do you think, Lexie?"

"I think you see what you're expecting to see," I said. "The people who are here to find ghosts are sure to see or hear something that seems like a ghost to them. Those who aren't may hear wind or squirrels in the attic."

Josie shuddered. "I don't know why anyone would *want* to see something spooky."

"I'm right there with you," I said, and she had no idea how true that was. There was a distant rumble of thunder, and I looked outside just in time to see an old van pulling up next to Jordan's car. It looked like something from the seventies, painted in bright, swirling colors. "Looks like the Mystery Machine just got here," I remarked. "Did they bring Scooby with them?"

"What?" Margarita asked, coming over to join me at the window, Josie right behind her.

"Well, actually it seems to be the Spooky Squad," I said, reading the name painted on the side of the van. Three people got out and went around to the back to get out bags.

"Oh, no," Josie said with a groan.

"What is it?" Margarita asked.

"I didn't know *he'd* be here."

"Who?" I asked.

"Laurence S. Franklin," Josie said, spitting the name out with great distaste. "My high school nemesis. I'd hoped I'd never have to see him again. I thought he'd left this town for good."

"I'm assuming the Spooky Squad are some kind of ghost

hunters,” I said.

“If Laurence is part of it, I’m sure it’s fake,” Josie said.

“What did he do?” Margarita asked, bristling with mama bear energy. If this Laurence guy so much as gave a funny look to her waitress, he’d find a flauta stuffed sideways into a very uncomfortable place.

“It wasn’t any one big thing. It was just a constant stream of annoyance, and no one would do anything about it because it was ‘just a joke.’” She made air quotes with her fingers and rolled her eyes. “He wrote ‘funny’ essays making fun of me in English class and read them out loud. He had a comic strip about me in the school paper. He didn’t use my name, but it was clear what he meant, and when I tried to talk to the teacher about it, she said he probably just liked me and was too shy to say so.”

“Ugh. That is so stupid,” Margarita said. “I hate it when adults tell girls that ‘he likes you’ thing when a guy is mean to them. It’s a prescription for getting into abusive relationships. If you want out of this gig, I’m fine with that. You can slip out through the kitchen and leave now.”

“I’ll take over for you,” I offered.

Josie squared her shoulders. “No. I can face him. I won’t let him have that much power over me. Besides, it’s been six years since we graduated. He may have changed.”

Paige and Rick went out to help the new arrivals with their bags. When they entered the foyer, their clothes were spattered with raindrops. The trio consisted of a guy whose picture could have been in the dictionary next to the word “hipster,” with thick-rimmed glasses, a soul patch under his lower lip, and a trilby hat; a tall, heavy-set Black guy laden with what looked like electronic equipment; and a petite Asian girl wearing a Captain Marvel T-shirt. Paige took them straight upstairs, and Josie breathed a heavy sigh of relief when they were gone.

“I take it hipster dude is your old enemy,” I said.

“Yep. He hasn’t changed all that much,” Josie said.

“You still have a chance to bow out,” Margarita said. “He hasn’t seen you yet.”

“No. I’ll stick it out.”

Another car arrived just as Paige and Rick got back down the stairs. “And this should be the last group,” Paige said. They went out to greet the man and woman who were getting out of the car.

“Oh, I’ve seen their show,” Josie said as the three of us watched them through the window. “It’s *Spectral Search*, or something like that. A man and a woman spend the night in supposedly haunted places, but it’s mostly about them looking like they’re more into each other than they are into the ghosts. There’s a lot of her jumping into his arms and then acting awkward about it later.”

They didn’t look too into each other to me. They slammed their car doors and appeared to be bickering as they went to the trunk to get their bags. I got the sense that this fight had been going on for a while. She wore a pantsuit and had reddish hair cut in a bob, while he was tall and dark-haired and wore a rumpled white shirt that was left untucked.

“I think they’re trying to be Mulder and Scully,” Margarita remarked. “What do you bet she’s a skeptic about ghosts?”

“She is,” Josie said. “She’s trying to convince him none of it’s real and is always looking for rational explanations, but he believes in ghosts and wants to get proof.”

“Yep, Mulder and Scully,” Margarita said.

“Who’s that?” Josie asked.

“She’s a mere child,” Margarita said, glancing at me for support. At my blank look she added, “*The X-Files*?”

“Sorry, I was overseas then, and probably a bit too young for it,” I said. “I’ve heard of it, but didn’t see it. You’d have been too young for it, too.”

“I have a cousin who was into it, big, so I saw parts of it when I was way too young for it, then saw it all on DVD, and they brought it back a few years ago. You ought to check it out. I bet you’d like it.”

As the pair entered the foyer, the man was saying, "There's supposed to be a freelance cameraman out of Dallas meeting us here. Is he here yet?"

"I'm afraid not," Rick said.

"I told you we should have brought our own," the woman said.

"Don't look at me. That was a network decision," the man said.

"Well, we could at least have met up with him in Dallas and traveled together."

I didn't catch the rest of the argument as they followed Rick up the stairs. I just heard their voices drifting down.

Paige came into the dining room. "I'll give our new arrivals a chance to change, and then we'll get the food out. We can keep the buffet open most of the evening, can't we?"

"Yeah, we're set up to keep everything warm or cold, as needed," Margarita said. "Let's start getting the warming pans going." I moved to help, but she shook her head. "You've got your own work to do."

I reluctantly left them to head across the foyer to the parlor, where Jordan had been cornered by Sirena, who was telling him about all the ghosts she'd made contact with. Paige came in right behind me and said, "We'll have the food out soon, but for now, help yourself to drinks over there at the bar, and let me know if there's anything you need."

Jordan saw me and said to Sirena, "Excuse me for a moment. I've got a little business to conduct. Nice meeting you." He hurried across the room. "Can I get you a drink, Lexie?"

"I'm working, so I think I'll stick to iced tea." We made our way to the bar area, where there was a pitcher of tea and an ice bucket. Jordan gallantly filled a glass and handed it to me.

"I'm a little surprised to see you here, with an event going on downtown," I said. "And isn't this the competition?"

"I'm actually a silent partner," he said. "Anyone we can bring in from outside the area is good for all of us, and this is likely to have an international draw."

“Really?”

“You’d be surprised by the number of people who make it a point to stay in places that are believed to be haunted. A bed-and-breakfast in the middle of nowhere might not get much business, but a haunted inn will bring in people who’d never come to this area otherwise. They did a great job of getting the press in for this opening. I recommended a publicist.”

“Do you believe they’ll actually find anything?” I asked. As far as I knew, Jordan didn’t know about my talent or the fact that I actually worked for a ghost.

He shrugged. “They’ll find what they want to find.”

The Black guy from the Spooky Squad was the first to make his way downstairs. He had a case slung over his shoulder, and when he entered the parlor, he glanced around nervously. He saw Jordan and his eyes went wide and he gulped visibly before looking away. Jordan smiled and moved over to him. “Hi, I’m Jordan Randall.”

“I know! I mean, I’ve heard of you, nice to meet you, sir.”

“You’re part of the Spooky Squad?” Jordan asked.

“Quentin Briggs. I’m mostly the tech guy. In fact, I use one of your apps.”

“Good to hear it. Have you met Lexie Lincoln? She’s the editor of the local newspaper.”

“Pleased to meet you, ma’am.”

“Welcome to the vicinity of Stirling Mills,” I said. “Can you tell me what the Spooky Squad is?”

“We’re a web series. It was something we started in college. There was a building rumored to be haunted, and we spent the night there and filmed it, then put it online. We got a lot of hits, so we kept doing it. Now we have sponsors and get invited to stuff like this. It’s pretty cool. It started for fun, but by the time we graduated, it was a full-time business.”

“Impressive,” I said.

“The parties are fun, but we may have to come back to do a proper episode, since the odds of there being any paranormal

activity are slim during the party, unless the ghosts really don't like visitors."

"Or maybe they do like visitors and come out to join us," I said. I forced myself not to glance around to see if the girl I'd noticed earlier had come back. I was hoping that my mental block was still working so I wouldn't have to know which of these people were frauds.

The girl who'd been with the trio came in. She'd changed into a dress with a very short skirt, which she wore with knee socks and ballerina flats. She came to an abrupt halt when she saw Jordan, then recovered her poise and approached, sticking out her hand to him. "Kelly Lee, the Spooky Squad," she said. "Mr. Randall, it's an honor to meet you. What brings you to this event?"

"Stirling Mills is my hometown," he said. "I'm pretty involved in local affairs."

A loud clap of thunder made all of us jump, and the lights flickered briefly. The rain began in earnest, hitting the windows in sheets. "We got off the road just in time," Quentin said. "I'm glad we weren't out in this, or we'd have never found this place."

"I like it. It adds to the atmosphere," Kelly said. "A haunted house is so much better during a storm."

"But it makes it harder to hear sounds, and the lightning screws with my equipment," Quentin said.

"It makes for a better show, though," she argued. "A bright, sunny day just isn't properly spooky."

There was another clap of thunder, and the lights flickered again. "I hope we don't lose power," Jordan said.

"Ooh, but candles!" Kelly said, clapping her hands with delight.

"Something smells good," Quentin said, glancing around as though looking for the source of the aroma.

"You're about to have the best Mexican food you've ever tasted," I said.

"Excellent!"

"They're still setting up, but they have some chips out, if you're

hungry,” I added.

“I could eat. It’s been ages since we stopped for lunch.”

We all headed toward the dining room, but before we made it there, Laurence came running down the stairs. “I heard something!” he shouted.

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Chapter Three

Kelly gasped, Quentin sighed, Carole didn't look impressed, and Sirena gazed toward the ceiling. I was with Quentin. I didn't want hunting ghosts to get between me and the enchiladas. "I heard that earlier," I said. "It's probably squirrels hiding from the storm in the attic."

Paige glanced at me and winced. "We do hear that noise often. I'm not entirely sure what it is," she said. I supposed she was willing to be honest with me, but she wasn't going to let on to the ghost hunters she'd invited to validate her haunted hotel that any spooky noises were nothing more than critters in the attic.

"C'mon, Quentin, Kelly," Laurence said. "I want to get some readings. You have the gear, right?"

Quentin patted the bag he carried, and Kelly got a phone out of her purse. The two of them followed Laurence up the stairs. Carole and Sirena joined them. I started to tag along, in spite of my misgivings—and my hunger—but I noticed that Jordan still stood in the middle of the foyer. He looked like he'd been hit with a freeze ray, since he was so utterly motionless that I wasn't sure he was breathing and he'd gone so pale he could have been carved out of ice.

"Jordan? Are you okay?" I asked.

He shook his head like he was trying to jostle something loose and blinked a few times. "What? Huh?" he said.

"What's wrong? You look like you just saw a ghost, and not in the fun way that you could make a video about or put on TV."

"Who was that guy?"

“His name’s Laurence something. He’s part of the Spooky Squad. Josie said he’s from Stirling Mills, so you may have seen him in town.”

“Oh, I’ve seen him,” he said, still gazing at the spot on the stairs where Laurence had stood. “You know about the accident and my sister, right?” Jordan and his younger sister had been in a car accident when he was in college. He was driving, though it wasn’t his fault, and she’d been left paralyzed.

“Yeah,” I said.

“Well, it was his dad who hit us. Laurence was just a kid and was in the back seat. He tried to lie to the police about what happened to keep his dad out of trouble. He swore the light was green and I was the one who ran the light. Fortunately, the other witnesses and the red light camera disagreed with him.”

“I thought Wes said the person who hit you was from out of town.”

He snorted. “Spoken like a true local. They lived in the country outside town, and they’d only moved there a few years earlier. To someone like Wes, that practically made them aliens. Anyway, I can hardly blame a kid for standing up for his dad, but he nearly got me in big trouble, and he had me doubting myself. I had a few really bad nights when I wasn’t sure my sister would pull through and I wasn’t entirely sure it wasn’t my fault before they got the information from the camera. It’s funny, he hasn’t changed that much, aside from the soul patch.” He took a deep breath, gave me a forced grin, and said, “Let’s go see if they’ve found a ghost.”

“Why not?” I said, following him up the stairs with one last longing look toward the dining room.

“You don’t really believe in all this ghost stuff, do you?” he asked.

I nearly tripped on the next step, and he put out an arm to steady me. “Oh, I don’t know,” I said vaguely. Did it count as “belief” when you knew for a fact? “You’ve got to admit, some pretty strange stuff happens in this town.”

“You’ve heard all that sideshow lore? It’s great for marketing, but I’m pretty sure that’s all it ever has been. That’s how the sideshow marketed itself, and now the town uses it, though not very well. If they really want to capitalize on that history, they need to play it up better rather than just hinting about it like it’s a secret.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. I didn’t want him to think I was a kook, though I wasn’t sure why his opinion mattered to me. The people who paid me were well aware of the situation, and they wouldn’t have hired me if I hadn’t been able to see and hear Jean. There were others who knew about Jean and that if I had my job, I had to have that talent. But I still wasn’t crazy about the world at large knowing. For one thing, it often gave me an edge when I was investigating something if the people I was dealing with didn’t know I could hear any ghosts who might have something to say. Ghosts weren’t always useful because they were so focused on their own circumstances, and I could seldom just ask them anything so straightforward as who killed them, but they did sometimes give me useful clues or story tips. Jean claimed that my knack for always finding stories was because of ghosts pointing me in the right direction, but I still wasn’t sure about that.

I was spared from having to give him a definitive response by our reaching the top of the stairs and finding the rest of the group gathered around Quentin, who was gazing intently at the readout on a device he held. Kelly stood nearby, shooting the scene on her phone. I took a couple of steps away so I wouldn’t be in the frame. I had no desire to end up as a supporting player in their web series.

“I’m not getting anything,” Quentin said. “You probably just heard rain on the roof or squirrels, or something.”

“I’ve certainly felt a presence here,” Sirena intoned. “What about you, Carole?”

Carole gave a noncommittal shrug, but her lips twitched ever so slightly.

“It would be funny if we all came all this way for squirrels,”

Laurence said with a laugh. "But the occasional episode with a rational explanation just makes it more credible when we really find something supernatural."

Jordan moved to the balcony doors, and I followed. It was raining so hard now that I couldn't see the road. "I hope it blows through quickly," I said. "I'm not looking forward to going home in this."

"It looked like a pretty big system, but it depends on how quickly it moves," he said. "We could use the rain, but not all at once. When it comes down this hard, it just runs off. I hope it doesn't hail with my car parked out there in the open."

The others had apparently decided they weren't going to see a ghost right away and headed down the stairs. I resisted the urge to race them to the dining room, instead following at a reasonable pace. Jordan caught my elbow before I got to the stairs and said, "Want to see a secret?"

My curiosity overcame my appetite. "Sure, I guess."

He led me back to a panel near the rear corner of the hall. He pressed on it, and it opened to reveal a narrow staircase. "A secret passage!" I said.

"More like service stairs, though secret passage sounds more fun."

He flipped a light switch on the wall and pulled the panel shut before we headed down the spiral staircase. I couldn't imagine having to go up and down these stairs hauling hot water or a full chamber pot. I had to brace myself against the walls to make my way down. The staircase came out in the kitchen, where Jordan flipped another switch to turn the light off before he shut the door. From inside the kitchen, it looked like a pantry near the back door. "I got the grand tour during the renovations," he explained.

"If someone wanted to be certain our guests saw a ghost, that sure would come in handy," I said, musing aloud.

He shot me a sly grin. "That is tempting, but I wouldn't want to risk messing things up for Rick and Paige. I just hope our guests

have enough imagination to believe there's something here so their fans will come in droves—and eat in our restaurants and shop in our stores while they're here. You have to drive through Stirling Mills to get here from the freeway.”

We entered the dining room from the kitchen just as the others came in through the foyer. “Wait a second, where'd you come from?” Kelly asked when she noticed us.

“We were right behind you,” Jordan said with a perfectly straight face. She glanced toward the foyer, then back at us, on the opposite side of the room, and frowned.

Laurence and Paige brought up the rear, walking close together as though they were talking. He was smiling, but she didn't look too happy. When she entered the dining room, she forced a smile and said, “It looks like dinner is ready. Enjoy!”

Margarita and Josie had set up a serving line with the hot dishes, with the sides, drinks, and condiments on the sideboard. Laurence somehow made it all the way across the room to be one of the first in line. I fell in behind him, with Carole and Sirena lining up behind me. They were in mid-argument. “There's no ghost in the attic,” Carole was saying.

“I tell you, I felt a presence,” Sirena replied.

“Ghosts tend to stay around either their bodies or a place that meant something to them. A ghost in this house would stay where it lived, not in the attic—unless maybe there was someone who had lived in the attic. That does happen. But not in this house. There's no ghost in the attic here.”

She had a point. We think of places like attics as spooky, but that's probably the place you're least likely to find a ghost. I usually find them in people's living rooms and bedrooms. And cemeteries. I fought back a shudder at the thought. Cemeteries are really unpleasant places if you can see ghosts.

“You're not as sensitive as I am, dear,” Sirena said, her tone patronizing. “If you'd felt what I felt, you'd know there was something up there.”

“Perhaps the presence was in one of the bedrooms or the hallway,” Carole said diplomatically. “I really don’t think it was in the attic.”

“Yes, I’m sure it was in one of the bedrooms,” Sirena said. “In fact, I’m fairly certain it spoke to me in a dream when I was napping this afternoon. It warned me of terrible danger in this house.”

Laurence reached the enchilada station Josie was manning. “Why, if it isn’t Josefina,” he said, pronouncing it the Spanish way, with the J sounding like an H. He exaggerated the accent, straddling the line between sounding like he was trying a bit too hard to pronounce it properly and sounding like he was doing a mocking ethnic stereotype. I began to understand why he’d been so annoying to her in school. People who pushed the boundary on being cruel while still retaining plausible deniability as to their intentions were impossible to deal with.

“Laurence,” she said with a brave smile, like she was fighting not to let him get to her. “So, you’re chasing ghosts now. I’ve gotta say, I didn’t see that coming.”

“But it seems I was right about where you’d end up.”

“I believe you said in your school newspaper column that I was most likely to be a cafeteria lady.”

“And here you are.”

“Working for the top Tex-Mex restaurant in the region,” Margarita put in. “She’s my best waitress. That’s why I bring her on my most important catering jobs. Now, what can we serve you? We’ve got cheese enchiladas, sour cream chicken enchiladas, and beef, chicken, and veggie fajitas.”

“I’m vegan,” he said with a sniff.

“Then veggie fajitas it is.”

“How is that even possible? Isn’t fajitas a particular cut of beef? By definition, you can’t have vegetable fajitas.” I couldn’t believe this guy was mansplaining Mexican food to the owner of a Mexican restaurant.

Margarita managed to maintain a cheery smile instead of reaching across the table to slap him. “Right you are. Technically, these are vegetables cooked fajita-style, but that sounds so pedantic and is such a mouthful, and most people understand what we mean. Our flour tortillas are made with vegetable shortening rather than lard, so you’re okay there, and the rice and churro beans are also vegan.” She plopped grilled vegetables on his plate and said to me, “And what’ll you have, Lexie?” Her tone made it clear that this was his cue to move on.

I asked for a little of everything. “I see what you mean about him,” I said softly to Josie once Laurence had moved on to the side dishes.

“Oh, this was nothing,” she said, and she really did look like she wasn’t bothered. “I think maybe he’s improved. People can change. And I know who I am. I don’t care what he thinks of me.”

“That’s my girl,” Margarita said with a proud smile.

Quentin, who’d been ahead of Laurence in line, was still at the sideboard, and I caught him saying, “Dude, you don’t have to be a jerk.”

“We’re the guests here. We don’t have to worry about the help.”

“Are you sure our hosts feel the same way? Because I don’t want to end up sleeping in the van tonight during this storm.” During all this, Kelly moved around the room, filming the scene on her phone. I couldn’t tell if she’d caught her colleagues’ argument.

Once my plate was full, I took a seat at one of the tables. A few minutes later, Carole approached. “May I join you?”

“Go right ahead.”

She took the seat across from me and said, “So, you’re the local newspaper editor.”

“Yes, but I’ve only been here since the beginning of March, so I’m not truly local. I’m still learning my way around.”

“Then you don’t know a lot about this house.”

“I’ve done some research. The former editors have left a lot of archives.” The archive was the way I usually explained how I knew

the things Jean told me.

“There was a teenaged girl killed in this house, wasn’t there?”

“I believe so.”

She nodded. “That’s what I thought. Perhaps I should have stopped by your office on my way here. The details I could find about this house’s history are sketchy and mostly hearsay. I haven’t found good primary accounts, and your newspaper doesn’t seem to have been digitized that far back.”

“I’m afraid not. We have an old-fashioned newspaper morgue, with bound paper volumes. I don’t think it was ever even put on microfilm, and it’s not a big enough paper for any of the universities to have it in their collection. I would like to start digitizing the archives before the paper completely disintegrates.”

She studied me for a moment, her head tilted slightly and a smile playing at the corners of her mouth. “Does all this talk of ghosts bother you? I find that reporters for conventional publications are often not entirely comfortable with talk of such things. I know that I have to be careful how I phrase my column, since I write for a mainstream publication. They want enough to intrigue the people who are looking for this kind of experience, but not enough to damage their credibility as a serious magazine.”

Fortunately, I’d just taken a bite of enchilada, so I had time to think of what to say while I finished chewing. “My story will be about the opening of the inn and the fact that people with national reputations came here to check it out,” I eventually said. “And I’ll report on whatever you say you experienced, the way I report on anything else I wasn’t a part of.”

Jordan came over to us. “Is this seat taken?” he asked.

“By you,” I said.

“And I’d imagine that you’re a skeptic. Those who rely on technology tend to be,” Carole said to him with a smile. “We were discussing how people react to talk of ghosts.”

“Frankly, I’m looking at it as a marketing angle. If people want that experience and they find it here, that’s great.”

The *Spectral Search* duo finally came downstairs and into the dining room. They were still bickering about the missing photographer. They might have come across as sexy on the screen, but all I saw in reality was tension. It looked to me like they barely tolerated each other, which must have made traveling together a nightmare. I couldn't help but wonder how the rooms were allocated. Paige had said there were five rooms. Carole and Sirena didn't work together, so I was sure each had her own room. That left three rooms for the Spooky Squad and this pair. Maybe the kids were all willing to bunk together, while the thirtysomething man and woman who could barely tolerate each other got their own rooms. Or did they have to room together when traveling to maintain the illusion that there was something going on between them?

Laurence raised his glass and called out, "Oh, cafeteria lady! I need a refill."

"I can't stand him," Carole muttered. "I think he gets most of his investigation ideas from my column, then he goes to the places I've covered and claims to prove that there's no supernatural activity there, after all. Supposedly, their 'equipment' proves it. I don't believe there's any technology that reliably measures spectral activity."

Paige, who'd been talking quietly to her husband in a corner, went to pick up a pitcher and refilled Laurence's glass.

"Yeah, he's a jerk," Jordan said, though he'd kept his face carefully neutral at Carole's complaints about having her reports undermined.

With a glare at his colleague, Quentin very pointedly stood and crossed the room to refill his own glass.

The *Spectral Search* team might have been bickering, but they took their own table rather than joining anyone else. That left Sirena sitting alone, but once all the guests had been served, Paige and Rick got their own meals and joined her.

"He's still not here?" the *Spectral Search* woman said after

looking around the room.

“I imagine the weather slowed him down a bit. It would be hard to find this place with the rain coming down like it is now,” the man said before digging in to his plate.

“That wouldn’t have been a problem if he’d arrived on time. We made it just fine.” She took her phone out of her purse and checked it, frowning. She sent a text before putting her phone away and picking up her fork to pick at the few grilled vegetables on her plate. She’d skipped the enchiladas, tortillas, and rice.

Sirena drifted over to them in a cloud of black lace. “Greetings. I’m a fan of your work. Sirena Midnight, Sirena’s Spirited Sojourns. I’m surprised our paths haven’t crossed before now. And have you met Carole Carlton?”

“Yes, we’ve met,” Carole said, turning in her chair to face them. “Nice to see you again.” She didn’t sound like she meant it.

Jordan stood and approached their table, holding his hand out to the woman. “Jordan Randall. Welcome to the Stirling Mills area.”

She took his hand reluctantly and gave it a perfunctory shake. “Valerie Ellis,” she said, releasing his hand.

Her partner was more enthusiastic. “Seriously? *The* Jordan Randall? Doug Glasser. So glad to meet you.” He grabbed Jordan’s hand and pumped it vigorously.

“And have you met Lexie Lincoln, our local newspaper editor?” Jordan asked.

“Hi,” I said, waving from my seat.

“Newspaper, huh?” Doug said. “Nice to see the legit press represented here. I got my start in local news, but on TV, not print.”

“Oh,” I said, hoping I sounded impressed rather than as dismayed as I felt. I kept getting these glimpses of my possible future if anyone found out I thought I could see and hear ghosts. Was this what lay ahead of me, a cheesy TV show?

“Of course, you know the Spooky Squad,” Sirena said.

“I can’t believe they’re here,” Doug said with a snarl, his good humor disappearing.

“And we have no cameraman,” Valerie said, heaving a sigh.

“Because we don’t shoot our show on our phones,” Doug said. “Well, most of the time. You know, I used to do my own shooting. And for a real TV show, not for some web series. If all else fails, I can shoot this one.”

“Yes, I know, you keep telling me,” Valerie snapped.

Jordan and Sirena stood there awkwardly before moving away unnoticed as the pair began bickering again.

“Since you’re local, do you have any insights about this house?” Carole asked Jordan. “It seems like the sort of place that would have been a magnet for teenagers, since the owners were absentee.”

He shook his head. “No, not really. I wasn’t cool enough to be invited to that kind of party, but I never heard of anything happening out here.”

“There must have been rumors about this place that kept people away,” she said.

“To some extent, yeah. But also there were ranch hands on the property and a few dogs. And you had to go through a pasture full of cattle to get to the house. Most people didn’t want to risk getting on the wrong side of a bull just to drink beer in an empty house.”

She grinned. “Yes, I can see how that might be a deterrent. And the truly dark parts of the house’s history would have been well before your time.”

She opened her mouth to ask another question, but just then there was a bolt of lightning so bright and so close that it made me blink, followed immediately by a loud clap of thunder that made me jump. And then the lights went out.

Chapter Four

This time, the lights didn't flicker back on. It stayed dark. The only light in the room came from the soft glow of the warmers under the buffet pans.

"Everyone sit tight," Rick instructed. "I'll get some lanterns."

"And I've got some candles," Paige added. "I was going to light those later for atmosphere, anyway." They used the lights on their phones to go to the kitchen. Rick returned with some mini camping lanterns and set one on each table. Paige made her way around the first floor of the inn with a lighter, lighting candles and hurricane lamps until the place was filled with a soft glow.

"I suppose we may as well eat up, since we can't refrigerate or reheat any leftovers," I said, getting up to go get seconds.

Paige said, "I'd planned to serve dessert in the parlor. Unfortunately, I can't make coffee with the power out. We're all-electric, since the gas lines don't come out this far and I didn't want to deal with a propane tank."

"I've got a camp stove and a grill, so we can make breakfast in the morning if the power isn't back," Rick said. "I'd rather not try to start the camp stove tonight while it's storming, but don't worry, we'll have coffee in the morning, no matter what." His tone implied that this was primarily for his benefit and the guests' needs were secondary. That man was not going to start a day without coffee, if he had to build a fire and grind the beans between his teeth.

"We could probably heat milk over one of our warmers, if you want to make cocoa," Margarita suggested.

“Let’s give it a shot,” Paige said. “Warm drinks would be nice right now.” They headed to the kitchen, along with Josie.

The guests drifted out of the room. Carole and Sirena each grabbed lanterns and headed up the stairs. The rest of us went across the foyer to the parlor, where Rick got a fire going in the fireplace before heading to the kitchen. The fire and the candlelight made shadows dance on the walls. Anyone who wanted to find a ghost here was sure to do so in this environment. The power outage was probably going to work out well for Rick and Paige.

Quentin stood staring out the front window into the gloom. Kelly wandered the room, shooting with her phone, capturing the flickering shadows on the walls. I heard raised voices coming from the library, where Doug and Valerie had gone to argue again some more. Apparently, he was entirely responsible for the storm and for the cameraman’s absence because he hadn’t planned ahead and hadn’t argued with the network. “I’m going to go check in with my family, see how the storm’s hitting them and let them know I’m okay,” Jordan said. “My mom tends to worry, ever since the accident.” He gave a sidelong glance toward Laurence, who’d given no sign that he was aware Jordan was present. He stood in the rear of the parlor, leaning against a wall, probably eavesdropping on Doug and Valerie.

Jordan headed out to the porch, leaving me feeling rather lonely. While Josie and Margarita were busy and Jordan was on the phone, I was left by myself. I’d have been grateful even for Sirena’s company, as the two groups left downstairs didn’t seem all that interested in interacting with anyone outside their groups. I sat on one of the parlor sofas and tried not to look awkward. I supposed I could interview someone.

Laurence wandered back through the parlor to the foyer. He started to cross to the dining room but stopped, his head cocked like he was listening for something. “Did anyone hear that?” he asked.

“I just hear the rain,” I said with a shrug.

“I’m going to go check it out. Maybe I’ll find those squirrels for them.” He turned to Quentin. “You coming?”

“Nah. Let me know if you need a readout, but my gear doesn’t work on squirrels.”

“What about you?” Laurence asked Kelly.

“I need to run to the bathroom, but I’ll be right up,” she said. “Is there one downstairs?”

I remembered Paige pointing the powder room out to me on the tour. “The door under the stairs,” I said.

Kelly picked up a lantern and headed off. As I watched Laurence’s lantern moving up the stairs, I couldn’t help but wonder why she didn’t just go up to her room, unless she thought maybe that was the real reason Laurence had gone up, and if they were sharing a room, that meant their bathroom was likely to be in use.

Paige entered, carrying a tray with a thermal carafe and a few mugs. Margarita was right behind her with a tray of cookies. “Anyone for cocoa and cookies?” Paige said. “I don’t know how hot the cocoa is. We did the best we could, under the circumstances. Rick’s getting some skewers so we can toast marshmallows and make s’mores.”

“Awesome!” Quentin said, coming over to take a mug Paige poured for him. “I know the power failure isn’t what you planned, but it’s like a camping trip.”

“Thank you for having such a positive attitude,” she said with a smile. “I suppose we’ll have to consider getting a generator. That was on our phase two list, but we may move it up.”

I didn’t think I could eat another bite, but the smell of Quentin’s cocoa made my mouth water, so I got up and got a mug for myself. I limited myself to one chocolate chip cookie.

A loud scraping sound from upstairs made all of us jump, and we looked up at the ceiling.

“That was no squirrel,” Quentin said.

As the sound went on, I thought it sounded like furniture was

being dragged across the floor. Paige winced. “We just refinished those floors,” she said.

Quentin sighed and shook his head. “I’m sorry. Laurence has no manners.” He heaved himself off the sofa, went to the foyer, and shouted up the stairs, “Laurence, don’t scrape the floors. Respect other people’s property.”

“Sorry,” came an insincere shout from above.

Quentin returned to the parlor, resumed his seat, and sipped his cocoa.

“I wonder if he found something,” Paige said, glancing at the ceiling above us. “It could be squirrels, but I’ve heard other things in this house that I’m sure aren’t squirrels.”

“Are you a believer?” Quentin asked her. “In ghosts and the supernatural, and stuff like that, I mean.”

“I don’t know,” she said with a slight shake of her head. “I’ve heard and felt things in this house, but I don’t know if it’s just my imagination because I expect to experience something. We knew when we bought the house that it was believed to be haunted. That was actually in the seller’s disclosure. We figured that could be a liability, or we could capitalize on the reputation and target guests who want to find out for themselves. Someone who’s expecting a haunting may talk themselves into experiencing one, and that’s better than someone who isn’t expecting one fleeing in terror when something strange happens.”

“Well, you should know that, no matter what Laurence says, he’s not exactly the most sensitive member of the group,” Quentin said. “He’s the one willing to go anywhere, no matter what the place’s reputation is, but that’s because I don’t think he ever feels anything.”

“Oh, so he’s not the one who could tell us whether or not the house is really haunted?” Paige asked.

Quentin scoffed. “As if.”

“Laurence!” Kelly’s voice came from upstairs. “Where are you?” There was a pause, then she called out, “Are you hiding from me?”

This isn't funny."

A few minutes later, she came back to the parlor, raised her lantern, and looked around. "He's not back down here?" she asked.

"We just heard him shoving furniture around up there," Quentin said.

"Well, he's not upstairs now."

"Did you check our room?"

"Yeah. Duh. I bet he's setting up some kind of prank. He's going to try to make everyone scream and jump and film it. I say we don't go up there and make him get tired of waiting."

Quentin leaned over and picked up a cookie. "Works for me."

Kelly's resolve didn't hold out for long. Only a few minutes later, she said to Quentin, "You go up and look for him."

"So I can be the one to scream on camera?"

"You never scream. The ghosts don't seem to startle you."

"Because my gear tells me they're around. It doesn't work on living people."

"Please, Quentin?" She gave him a pleading expression, batting her eyelashes.

It worked. "Okay," he said with a sigh. He drained his cup with one more gulp, set the cup down, stood, picked up a lantern, and headed for the foyer. "Laurence, stop screwing around and come down here. Or did the squirrels eat you?"

When there was no answer, he headed up the stairs. He came back about five minutes later, shaking his head. "Y'all, he's not up there at all. Where'd he go?"

"What could have happened to him?" Paige asked.

"A ghost?" Kelly asked in a small voice. Quentin moved to put a reassuring arm around her shoulders, but she shot him a glare and flinched away. He pulled his arm back.

"Ghosts don't usually hurt people," Quentin said. "They're not solid, so it's not like one could have grabbed him and stuffed him in a closet."

"Did you check Carole and Sirena's rooms?" I asked. "I think

they're still up there. Maybe he wanted to compare notes with them."

"No," Kelly said.

I finished my cocoa and put my cup down before standing and picking up one of the lanterns. "Then let's go up and check with them."

Kelly and I went upstairs, and I had to admit to feeling a little uneasy about heading up into the darkness. I knew that ghosts were real and that there was a good chance there was something unearthly up there, even though I also knew it was unlikely that a ghost had done anything to Laurence.

At the top of the stairs, I held my lantern up and surveyed the upstairs hall. I didn't notice anything unusual there. I couldn't even tell where the furniture had been moved. I wasn't sure which rooms Carole and Sirena were in, but I knew the doors to the front ones had been open when Paige gave me the tour, so I turned and knocked on the door in the rear corner. A moment later, the door opened and a cloud of orchid and spice scent hit me in the face. When I blinked away the tears the scent had brought to my eyes, I saw Sirena standing in the doorway, her makeup more intense than it had been at dinner. "Sorry to bother you," I said, "but have you seen Laurence?"

"I did hear some sounds in the hallway, and the spirits have been quite active in the attic, but I've been in my room this whole time, freshening up. One wears different makeup to look better in candlelight than one does for daylight or artificial lighting. Has something happened to Laurence?" She sounded rather eager.

"He's missing!" Kelly said, punctuating it with a sob.

"He can't have gone far in this weather. Don't worry, I'm sure he's around somewhere," Sirena said before closing the door.

I really didn't think he'd be in Carole's room, unless either he'd gone to gloat or possibly blackmail her or she'd dragged him inside to threaten him. Even so, I tried the next door. I was about to give up and move on to the next one when Carole opened the door and

peered out. "Yes, what is it?" she asked, sounding mildly miffed about being disturbed.

"Have you seen Laurence?" I asked.

"You think I'd let *him* in my room?" she asked.

"Hey!" Kelly protested.

"Did you hear anything up here earlier?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I'm sorry, I've been in the bathroom for much of that time. I make a point of brushing and flossing immediately after each meal. That removes much of the temptation to eat dessert, since toothpaste clashes with chocolate." She'd gone upstairs immediately after dinner and had been in her room the whole time since then, which was a lot of time to spend brushing her teeth, but it's not polite to inquire what a lady has been doing in her bathroom. "Is there some reason you're looking for Laurence?"

I glanced at Kelly, but this time she remained silent. "He went up here a while ago, but he never came back down, and he doesn't seem to be up here," I said.

"You've checked his room, of course?"

"Yeah," Kelly said.

"Let's give it another try," I told Kelly. She led me through the hall to the room at the front right of the house. It was the size and shape of the room Paige had shown me, but it was furnished with a four-poster double bed at one end and twin bunk beds on the other. I supposed it was meant to be a room for families, though I couldn't imagine bringing kids to stay at a haunted inn. Maybe it was meant for ghost-hunting teams who didn't want separate rooms.

"Laurence, if you're in here, the joke has gone on long enough," Kelly said. A flash of lightning from outside made her squeal and jump. I was equally startled, though I managed to swallow my scream. We looked in the bathroom and checked under the beds, but there was no sign of Laurence. A suitcase lay open on the floor, and Kelly studied it. "It looks like he came in here to get some of

his gear.”

“What did he take?” I asked.

She knelt and sifted through the open case. “I think maybe the head rig. It’s got a lamp and a camera on it. It lets us have light and shoot while keeping our hands free. He must have been planning to check something out.”

I immediately thought of the secret staircase Jordan had shown me. Had Laurence possibly found it? Were there any other passages or hiding places in this house?

We left the room, Kelly locked her door, and we went back downstairs. “Find anything?” Quentin asked when he met us in the foyer.

“Nope. Carole and Sirena haven’t seen him,” I reported.

“But you notice they didn’t invite us into their rooms to search,” Kelly said, her tone dark.

“Does he smoke?” I asked.

“Smoke?” Kelly asked, frowning. “No. Why?”

“He might have stepped outside to smoke. There’s a covered breezeway in the back.”

“I’ve never seen him smoke,” she said. “As much time as we spend traveling together, I’m sure I’d have noticed, or I’d have smelled it on him. But he might have gone out to look around. He might have wanted to get some footage of the storm and the exterior of the inn.” She seemed pretty cheered by this possibility.

Kelly and I headed to the kitchen and out the back door. There was nobody in the breezeway between the house and the garage. As hard as the wind was blowing, the roof over the breezeway didn’t stop much of the rain, and we got wet just standing in the open doorway. We stepped back inside, and I pulled the door shut. “Let’s look out front,” I suggested.

We went back through the kitchen and dining room to the foyer and out to the front porch. Jordan was still there, talking on his cell phone. He noticed us, smiled, and walked to the other end of the porch.

“Look! There’s a light!” Kelly called out. There was a small light bobbing around the corner of the house, but the rain obscured the figure under it. “Looks like he’s getting footage of the front of the house. I hope it picks up the candlelight through the windows.” She raised her voice and shouted, “Laurence! Get back inside! You’re getting drenched!” The light went out.

I figured that mystery was solved, and I was getting wet standing on the porch, so I went back inside to stand by the fireplace. “Find anything?” Quentin asked.

“Looks like he’s outside, shooting the exterior of the house in the storm.”

“Now, that’s dedication,” Paige remarked.

“That’s unusual,” Quentin said. “I’m surprised he’s doing that himself instead of sending me out there to do it.”

A moment later, Jordan came back inside, wiping water off his glasses with a handkerchief. “Good thing I called. My mom was having a panic attack,” he said. “Ooh, is that hot cocoa? I sure could use some.” He poured himself a cup. He then almost spilled it when there was a lightning strike followed by a clap of thunder and then the wail of a car alarm. “That must have been close,” he said. “It set off my alarm.” He set his mug down and moved to the front window to look out while he punched a button on his key fob remote. The wailing stopped, and he came back to get his cocoa.

Kelly came in, shivering and running her hands up and down her arms. She wasn’t dressed to be out in this kind of weather. “Did he come in yet? I thought I saw the light moving to our van, and then I couldn’t see it anymore.”

“I haven’t seen him,” I said.

“He must have gone out to get something,” Quentin said.

“Oh, right,” she said, sounding relieved. “He’ll be drenched when he gets in, so he’ll want cocoa. I’m sure he’ll be in here soon.”

Rick came in carrying a tray. “Anyone want s’mores? I found some barbecue skewers, and we had some marshmallows and

graham crackers. The chocolate's probably a little too fancy for this purpose, but I guess we can make do." He placed the tray on an end table near the fireplace.

"I don't think I've had s'mores since Boy Scouts," Jordan said, going over to pick up a skewer. He threaded a couple of marshmallows on it and moved to the fireplace. The rest of us in the room joined in. Paige soon came in with Josie and Margarita, giving the impression that she'd herded them away from work to come have fun with us. The scene was nice and cozy, with the fire and toasting marshmallows inside while the wind howled and sheets of rain pelted the windows outside.

The chocolate was high-end imported stuff, which really classed up the traditional campfire treat. After a bite, I told Rick, "Maybe you should make this part of your usual offering."

"Without having to turn off the lights, I'd hope," he replied with a grin. "And we can't guarantee the rain to give us the proper atmosphere."

"Yeah, I like the high-class s'mores," Kelly said. "Try the raspberry chocolate. It goes really well with the marshmallow." She seemed to have relaxed after finding where Laurence went. I couldn't tell why she was so worried about him. She didn't seem to like having him out of her sight. That made me wonder if something had happened in the past that put her on edge when she didn't know where he was.

But she did have a point about the raspberry chocolate. I wouldn't have thought it would work, but it blended nicely with the marshmallow. The dark chocolate in another bar wasn't quite as melty as milk chocolate, which meant there was less chocolate dripping, and I thought the contrast between the bitter chocolate and the sweet marshmallow was interesting.

We were so busy comparing notes about the chocolate selection and putting out the occasional flaming marshmallow that a bang on the door startled all of us.

Chapter Five

“We’re not expecting anyone else,” Rick said with a frown.

“Maybe it’s Laurence and he didn’t want to just barge in,” Kelly said, setting down her skewer and getting up from her position kneeling by the fireplace.

Rick went to answer the door, the rest of us from the parlor behind him. Rick opened the door to reveal a man draped in a rain poncho. He carried a large bag in each hand. Looking behind him, I noticed a new vehicle parked in front, a white SUV sitting next to the Spooky Squad’s van. “This is the Hilltop House, isn’t it?” the newcomer asked. “I’ve been driving back and forth down this road for ages trying to find it, but I didn’t see any lights.”

“I’m afraid the power’s out,” Rick said. “But you’ve come to the right place.”

Valerie came charging out of the library. “Is it our cameraman?” she demanded.

“Uh, yeah, yeah, I am,” the man said, though he looked like he might be having second thoughts about that. I could hardly blame him. Working with Valerie would be no picnic.

“Finally! Where have you been? You were supposed to be here hours ago.”

“In case you haven’t noticed, ma’am, there’s a storm. You can’t drive over about twenty if you want to see where you’re going, and I had trouble finding the place. But I’m here now.”

“Please, come in,” Paige said. “Have you eaten?”

“I could do with a meal.” He set his gear down in the foyer and pulled the poncho off over his head to reveal a scruffy beard,

shaggy hair, rain-spattered jeans, and an ill-fitting, rumpled denim shirt. He wasn't exactly the height of professionalism, but I'd seen worse from news photographers who hadn't been out in the rain. Some of them looked like the station kept them chained up in a kennel. He kicked off his shoes before going further into the house and followed Paige and Margarita into the dining room. Even without his shoes, he left a trail of water behind him, since he was soaked to the knees.

"We kept some food on the warmer in case people got hungry later, since we can't reheat anything with the power out," Margarita said.

"I hope you've got a battery-powered light kit," Valerie said.

He looked for a moment like he wasn't sure, then shrugged and said, "Yeah, of course."

"Let the poor guy eat," Doug said. "I'm sure he's had a rough trip." To the cameraman, he said, "Doug Glasser. Thanks for coming out."

"I'm, uh, Brent Brown. Something smells good."

"We've got cheese enchiladas, chicken enchiladas, and chicken, beef, and veggie fajitas," Margarita said.

"Can I have a little of everything?" Brent asked.

"Sure thing," Margarita said. She filled a plate and put it in front of him. Josie brought him a glass of iced tea. Doug and Valerie pulled up chairs at his table and began telling him what they wanted to shoot while he dug in to the food like a starving man who hadn't had a hot meal in months.

Paige interrupted the shooting instructions to say, "We've got cookies, s'mores, and cocoa in the parlor when you're ready."

The rest of us went back across the hall to our s'mores. I had to admit that I wasn't entirely thrilled about the cameraman's arrival. That meant one more camera I'd have to dodge to keep out of anyone's TV show, and it meant more people actively looking for ghosts. I hadn't seen one since I'd made the decision to try to block them out, but I still wasn't sure if it had worked or if the ghosts

had made themselves scarce while there was such a crowd in the house. It would be ironic if it turned out that the haunted inn was only haunted when it was nearly empty. I noticed that Carole and Sirena were with the group now. They must have come downstairs when Brent arrived.

I was just poking a marshmallow onto a skewer when Kelly said, "Wait a second, where's Laurence? Is he still not back inside?"

"He probably had to go put on dry clothes," Quentin said.

"But did anyone see him come in?"

We all looked at each other and shook our heads.

"Try calling him," Quentin suggested.

"You won't get a good signal in the house," Jordan said. "That's why I was out on the porch. The roof's metal, with solar shielding inside. That's great for avoiding serious hail damage and keeping cooling bills low, but not so great for cell phone reception. I might recommend they get an indoor repeater so guests can stay connected."

Kelly moved to the front window and looked at her screen. "It's not a strong signal, but I've got one," she said. She tapped on her screen and held her phone up to her ear. A moment later, she lowered the phone, frowning. "It went straight to voice mail. You didn't hear it ring from anywhere in the house, did you?"

Again, we all shook our heads. "If he's upstairs, it'll be worse because you're right under the roof there," Jordan said.

"I'll go look for him," Kelly said with an exasperated sigh. She stalked out of the room, and I saw her lantern going up the stairs.

"And this is when he'll jump out at her and make her scream," Quentin said wryly. "In three, two, one . . ."

But there was no scream.

Kelly came back, now looking truly distressed. "He's not up there. There aren't any wet clothes in the room, either. I'm getting really worried."

"Yeah, Laurence usually isn't this patient with his pranks,"

Quentin said, now sounding a little concerned.

“Okay, you look down here, and I’ll take another look upstairs,” I said. I was a bit worried about Laurence, but I was mostly tired of Kelly’s moping. I was starting to understand why he might want to disappear.

“I’ll go with you,” Margarita said, getting up to join me.

“You don’t have to,” I said as we entered the foyer.

“I don’t like you being up there alone. And I’m bored.”

“Okay then. We don’t have to be too quick about coming back down, either.”

We reached the upstairs hall and held our lanterns up. “I don’t see anything,” she said.

“I don’t either. But there’s something I want to check.” I went to the corner where Jordan had shown me the secret stairway. It took me several tries to find the right panel to press, and then the door popped open.

“A secret passage?” Margarita said.

“Jordan says it was service stairs. Since I guess you didn’t want to actually run into a servant on the main stairs.”

“I imagine if you had a house like this before electricity and stuff like vacuum cleaners and washing machines, you’d have needed at least one servant.”

I held my lantern out over the stairs, but there was no sign of anyone there, unless he’d run down the stairs to the kitchen when he heard the door open. “Doesn’t look like he’s in here. I’d wondered if he’d found this staircase and was planning to use it.” I shut the door and turned around, surveying the hall. If Laurence hadn’t gone into his room, he wasn’t upstairs.

The curtains on the balcony doors fluttered, though the doors were shut. “There must be a draft up here,” Margarita said.

We walked toward the doors. “I don’t feel anything,” I said.

“You think it’s a ghost?” she whispered.

“I don’t know. I haven’t seen anything up here.”

“So, draft, then. What was the furniture that was being moved

earlier?”

I lowered the lantern to look at the floor, searching for scuff marks or scrapes. “Looks like it was this,” I said when I spotted a line of scrapes leading to a table.

She winced. “Ouch. Messing up the floors like that is just tacky. Why would he have even needed to move the table?” She held her lantern up to illuminate the ceiling over the table. There was a panel directly above with a recessed handle in one end of it. “It was moved to right under that attic hatch. I bet that’s why he was moving it. Has anyone looked up there?”

“I don’t think so. But he went up here to see what was making noise in the attic, so he might have.” I frowned as I realized something. “Have you heard any of the sounds like what we heard earlier since we’ve been up here?”

“No, I don’t think so. Not that I’ve noticed. But it may be because the rain is pretty loud.”

“Maybe we should see what’s in the attic.”

“You think he was attacked by a rabid squirrel up there?”

“Or he’s lurking up there and we can bust him.” I handed Margarita my lantern, stepped out of my shoes, climbed onto a chair, and from there onto the top of the table. I had to stand on tiptoes to reach the handle on the latch. I imagined this was why they didn’t have a rope pull like this kind of door usually had. They wouldn’t want to encourage guests to open the attic door.

It took a good tug that nearly threw me off-balance to get the hatch to move, and then it came down quickly the rest of the way, a set of steps unfolding. I sat on the table and swung my legs around over the edge so I could slide off onto the floor. “Do you want to go up, or do you want me to?” I asked.

“Go right ahead,” she said. “I’m not a fan of attics. Or rabid squirrels. Or raccoons.”

I took my lantern from her and made my way up the steps. They were a cross between a staircase and a ladder, and I didn’t feel entirely steady on them. This was an activity ill-suited to

darkness, and I didn't like sticking my head into a place I couldn't see. I hoped any critters hiding in the attic would be startled enough to shy away from me instead of attacking. As soon as my head and shoulders were up above the attic floor, I raised my lantern to dispel the gloom—and scare away the squirrels—and looked around.

The first thing I noticed was that there were no glowing eyes staring back at me, much to my relief. The second thing was that this was perhaps the cleanest, least cluttered attic I'd ever seen. The flooring was obviously new, which probably explained the lack of clutter. Anything that had been in the attic must have been moved out for the renovations. I thought that made it even less likely that whatever noises we'd heard were caused by a ghost. There weren't even any old objects or clothes a ghost might be attached to—no antique trunk full of personal relics, no creepy old rocking horse, no tattered wedding gown on a dress form. There was only a pile of what looked like old drop cloths in one corner and another pile of clothes not too far from me. It was really loud up under the roof, with the rain hammering on the metal above me. I hadn't noticed any hail earlier, but it sounded like someone was unloading a dump truck full of gravel right onto the roof.

I took another step up and set the lantern on the floor. That was when I noticed that the pile of clothes had a hand. It wasn't just a pile of clothes. It was a person, and it looked solid enough that I was pretty sure it wasn't a ghost. The face was turned away from me, but the outfit looked like what Laurence had been wearing. "I think I may have found him," I said, my voice shaking in spite of my effort to sound calm.

"Uh oh," Margarita said from below me. "That doesn't sound good. I mean, if everything were okay, we'd have heard him say 'boo' or something."

"Unless he's waiting until I go to check his pulse." I forced some iron into my voice and said firmly, "Laurence, this better not be an act." He didn't move, not even a slight twitch. If he wasn't

unconscious, or worse, he had a lot of self-control.

I knew that this was likely to be a crime scene I shouldn't disturb, but I also knew that if it was possible he was injured rather than dead, I needed to check and get him help. I climbed the rest of the way into the attic and took a roundabout route to get to him, since I figured that whoever had attacked him would have most likely moved more directly. This way, I might not blur any footprints.

When I reached the body, I held the lantern to check his face. It was definitely Laurence. His eyes were half-closed. If he was breathing, it was so faint that his chest didn't move. I groped around his neck in search of a pulse. I didn't find anything, and his skin felt cool to my touch. I didn't think he'd been missing long enough for his body to have cooled noticeably, so it might have been my imagination.

When I didn't find a pulse at his neck, I tried again on the wrist I could reach most easily. Nothing. When I moved my hand back to try one more time on the neck, my hand brushed his hair and came away with a smear of blood. A patch of hair near his temple was matted with blood, like he'd been struck from the side. I raised the lantern to search for what had hit him, but I didn't see anything. The roof was high enough in this part of the attic that he hadn't hit his head on a beam. I took my phone out of my jacket pocket and snapped a few pictures to make a record of the scene, then I went back the way I'd come and made my way down the steps. My legs trembled, so I took extra care to find each step before I put my foot down. I held on to the steps for a moment once I was back on the ground until I felt steadier. This was the second body I'd found with its head bashed in, and the experience wasn't getting any easier.

"Is he . . .?" Margarita asked.

"I think so."

"But who? How?"

"He was hit in the head."

“It’s got to be one of the people here, right?”

“Probably.” The thought made me shiver. “I think I’ve read this book. And seen this movie.”

“Let’s just hope it’s not the one where we all get picked off, one by one.”

“I’m going to call the police,” I said. “The sooner we get some cops out here, the better.”

But when I went to make the call, I didn’t have a signal. The metal roof, I remembered. Jordan had said it was worse upstairs. I moved to stand by the balcony doors and got one bar. It looked like I’d have to go outside. I had to unlock the door to open it, and when I stepped onto the balcony, I finally had a decent signal. I got hit with some blowing rain, but it wasn’t too bad.

I dialed 911, and the call was answered by a familiar voice saying, “Thank you for calling Stirling Mills Emergency Services. What is your emergency?” That was the problem with calling 911 on a cell phone. You never knew where the call would get sent.

“Hey, Marge, it’s Lexie Lincoln,” I said. “I’m out at the Hilltop House Inn, which is out of your jurisdiction, I know, but the call went to you. One of the guests out here is dead. I don’t think it was an accident or natural causes. We’re going to need some help.”

“You found *another* body?”

“This is only my second,” I said defensively.

“That’s still way above the average, hon, since most people don’t find any.”

“Well, it’s not like it’s a hobby. I’m not *looking* for bodies.”

“You’re sure he’s dead?”

“I checked multiple places for a pulse. If he’s not dead, he’s under really deep.”

“Do you think you’re in immediate danger?”

“Well, we’re out here in the middle of nowhere with a person who bashed someone’s head in, so it could be a problem.”

“I’ll get in touch with county and see if they can get someone to you. A lot of the roads are out tonight and the first responders are

all pretty busy.”

“You mean we’re stranded out here?” I was afraid I sounded a bit hysterical.

“I don’t know. I do know that the road between you and Stirling Mills is flooded completely. They’ve already had one high-water rescue out there. It’s possible that you can be reached by another route, but I don’t know how long it’ll take. It’s a bad night out there. In the meantime, you be careful. Try to keep everyone together. It’ll be harder for the killer to do anything if you’re all together. And you know what Wes would say.”

“Stay out of it and don’t get involved,” I said.

“I know that’s too much to ask, but do be careful. Call back if anything happens.”

I ended the call and stepped back inside. “They may not be able to get anyone to us anytime soon,” I reported to Margarita after shutting and locking the door behind me. “A lot of the roads around here are flooded.”

“Which makes it even more likely that someone in this house did it, since no one else could get here or get out of here. Are you going to tell them you found Laurence?”

I sat on one of the chairs and wished we had electricity so I could have made a cup of tea. “I don’t know,” I said with a sigh.

She took the seat across from me. “It may just send everyone into a panic.”

“But if the cops make it here, it’ll be obvious what we knew, and that won’t make matters easier. I think I’m going to have to tell them.”

Chapter Six

Although we'd agreed that we needed to tell the others what happened, neither of us moved. "Who do you think did it?" Margarita asked. "If you'd asked me earlier in the evening who in the group was most likely to be a murderer, I'd have said Laurence, since he was such a sadist. But, well . . ." she gestured toward the attic.

"I'm not sure anyone but Kelly liked him," I said.

"She was pretty frantic when she couldn't find him. Was she his girlfriend?"

"It didn't look like it to me. I don't recall him paying much attention to her. There was certainly no obvious mutual affection. It may have been an unrequited thing, but I couldn't tell whether or not her interest was welcomed."

"Maybe she got mad about him rejecting her. But she seems awfully small to be able to overpower someone like Laurence."

"It depends on what was used to hit him. With a heavy enough object, it wouldn't have taken much force, especially if she let gravity do a lot of the work."

"What about the other guy in their group?"

"I got the impression that Quentin was exasperated with Laurence. He scolded him for the way he talked to Josie and apologized about Laurence scraping the floor when he moved the table. Laurence seemed to be the one who got the attention, while Quentin was the real ghost detector. He said something to that effect. And I suspect he's into Kelly, who only had eyes for Laurence. Both he and Kelly went upstairs looking for Laurence, by

themselves, so they would have had the opportunity.”

“Okay, so they’re suspects. Who else?”

“There was his weird thing with Josie.”

“She didn’t kill him, I’m sure of that. Not only do I know she isn’t the killing type, but I wasn’t away from her for more than a few seconds the whole evening.”

“No, I don’t think she would have done it. And if you’d killed him to defend her, I don’t think you’d have hidden him in the attic. You’d have announced it and called the cops yourself.”

“Damn straight. But he stayed away from us after dinner, so we didn’t have to deal with him at all. What about the two older ladies? I don’t remember seeing them since dinner.”

“They went up to their rooms.”

“So they’ve been up here all this time?”

I turned to look toward their rooms, and she followed my gaze. “I saw them in the parlor after Brent got here, but they were up here until then, so there’s a good chance they were here when it happened. I think they’re more likely to have killed each other than Laurence. But Carole really didn’t like Laurence. It seems he liked to play spoiler to other people who wrote about ghosts. He’d visit places where they’d reported hauntings, then ‘prove’ that those places weren’t really haunted. He said something about how proving a place wasn’t haunted made it more credible when he said a place was haunted.”

“Which way was he leaning here?”

“He seemed to go for the squirrels in the attic explanation for the noises we heard. That was why he came upstairs after dinner. He was going to check out the sounds.”

“Do you know if he said anything to Paige or Rick about that?”

“Paige was here when he said that stuff about needing to have some places that weren’t haunted. And I noticed her frowning when they walked together back into the dining room, so maybe he said something more direct to her. But surely that’s not worth killing over. I’d think that a murder during the grand opening

would be worse publicity than some web series saying there weren't ghosts here."

"Are there ghosts here? Or is it just hype?"

"I saw one in the parlor when I first got here," I admitted.

"Which means Laurence wasn't legit if he was going to claim this hotel isn't haunted. Was he arbitrarily deciding whether or not a place was haunted?"

"And if so, I wonder if there was any kind of shakedown, like you had to pay up for him to say your place was haunted. That would give Paige and Rick a motive."

"They don't strike me as murderers. Rick said he was in the army, so I guess he might have the skills, but he's like what you said about me, that he'd only kill in defense of himself or someone else, and then he wouldn't cover it up."

"He said he was army? I figured he was ex-military. And you're right, I can't picture him being shady enough to do this." Still, he knew about the secret stairs, and he might have had the opportunity to sneak up while people were running in and out of the kitchen. "Did you see him the whole time you were cleaning up from dinner?"

"I was in the dining room rigging a way to heat cocoa most of the time, and he was rinsing off dishes in the kitchen. But Paige and Josie were in and out of the kitchen a lot. I don't think he was ever alone for long. Well, except when he went out to get the stuff for s'mores. He had to get the chocolate, graham crackers, and skewers from their apartment." She winced. "It's not sounding good for Rick."

"Did you know about Jordan and Laurence?"

"They had a connection?"

"Laurence was apparently the son of the guy who hit Jordan and his sister in that accident."

"Oh, he was that kid? The one who tried to lie about what happened?"

"You knew about that?"

"I remember being vaguely aware of it, and he's mentioned it. I think that's why he's so big on cameras now. Surely you don't think Jordan killed him in revenge."

"I seriously doubt it, but I'm trying to be objective here. He was out on the front porch the whole time, so he was out of sight, but he'd have been a lot wetter if he'd gone around the house to the kitchen door and then up the back stairs."

"And what about those other people? I don't recall seeing them talk to Laurence."

"I don't think they did. They were off in the library most of the time. At least, I think they were. I noticed them when I first went to the parlor, but after that, I wasn't paying much attention to them. Laurence was eavesdropping on them before he went upstairs."

"Hmm, I wonder if that means they had a history. Or did he overhear something from them, and that's why he went upstairs?"

"Okay, now we're getting into speculation," I said, feeling like I was channeling Wes.

"So I guess we'd better get down there and tell everyone."

"Yeah," I said, but neither of us moved. I didn't know about her, but I wasn't looking forward to breaking the news or dealing with the aftermath. The longer I delayed, the better the chance that the police might show up so I wouldn't have to deal with it.

"They're probably going to start worrying about us soon," Margarita said after a while.

"Probably." I forced myself to my feet with a groan. "Let's close this hatch. I don't want to encourage anyone else to go up there."

The steps folded easily and the hatch practically pulled itself up. I climbed onto the table to shut it the rest of the way, then got down from the table and put my shoes back on. "Okay, time to face the music," I said, girding my mental loins.

Once we got downstairs, I glanced into the parlor, where most of the guests were. Brent, Valerie, and Doug were still in the dining room, with Josie hovering around the food. I went to stand in the

doorway of that room. “Um, hi,” I said. They all looked toward me. “Something’s happened, and I need to get everyone together in the parlor.”

“What is it? Doug asked.

“We’ll talk about it in the parlor.”

With a shrug, Brent put his fork down and got up. The others followed him past me and to the parlor. Josie held back to walk with Margarita and me. “What’s going on?” she whispered to Margarita.

Margarita shook her head.

“Bad?”

I nodded, a sick feeling in my stomach. I was starting to regret that second serving of dinner, the cocoa, and all those marshmallows. No one in this group struck me as the murdering type, but there was a body in the attic that suggested otherwise. I couldn’t help but survey the guests once I entered the room, trying to picture each of them killing Laurence. If any of them was a killer, he—or she—was putting up a good false front.

I’d run through some of my thoughts with Margarita, but now that I was in front of the group, I took another look, re-evaluating them. I couldn’t imagine Josie killing anyone, and she hadn’t acted all that angry, even when Laurence insulted her. Jordan’s history with Laurence was certainly worthy of a grudge, and Jordan had acted shocked when he’d encountered Laurence, but I didn’t think Jordan did it. A notorious murder case would hurt his plans to make this area a tourist mecca and bring in jobs. Not all publicity was good.

For that reason, I couldn’t see why Paige or Rick would want to kill Laurence, though with that secret staircase, they might have had the opportunity while they were in the kitchen. A murder would be bad publicity for their inn. I didn’t think Paige was *that* upset about her newly refinished floors being scuffed. On the other hand, there was the possibility that Laurence was extorting them.

Kelly was the only one in the group acting like she was in any

kind of distress as she worried about the missing Laurence. She'd been upstairs around the time he went missing, so she'd have had the opportunity at the right time. Was her concern about him all an act to deflect suspicion? I kept her on my mental suspect list. After all, most murders were committed by people close to the victim. Which brought me to Quentin. Romantic jealousy had led to many a murder, and he'd been upstairs alone around the time Laurence must have been killed.

Doug and Valerie didn't seem to have liked Laurence all that much. Was there some kind of rivalry between the two groups of ghost hunters? I hadn't had a good view of them the entire time in question. Depending on when Laurence had been killed, they might have had the opportunity. They could have gone upstairs while we were on the porch, looking outside for Laurence. That meant Laurence would have had to have been hiding in the attic without answering as Kelly called for him, but Quentin had suspected him of preparing a prank. Or the rain on the roof might have been loud enough to drown out the sounds from inside the house, so Laurence hadn't known people were looking for him.

Carole hadn't been happy with Laurence. She'd said he liked trying to discredit her columns. She and Sirena had been upstairs in their rooms when he went missing, so they'd certainly had the opportunity, but I couldn't picture either of them being able to get that attic hatch opened. I didn't know what grudge Sirena might have had with him, possibly the same as Carole. If he'd tried to undermine Carole, he might have gone after Sirena, too, or had she been too low-profile for him to bother with?

Valerie spoke up, startling me out of my thoughts, "What's going on? Why did you want us all in here?"

I moved over to the fireplace and turned to face the guests. "I found Laurence," I announced. "He was in the attic. I'm afraid he's been killed."

"What?" Carole yelled.

"I sensed there was terrible danger," Sirena said.

“Give it a rest, Sirena,” Carole snapped. “This is not the time for your act.”

“Killed? Are you certain?” Paige asked after a quick glance toward her husband. “Could it have been an accident?”

“No, I’m certain it was no accident.” I fought back a shudder as the image of Laurence lying on the attic floor popped into my head. “I’d rather not get into specifics now, but there were pretty clear indications that his death wasn’t natural.”

There were gasps from the group, and Kelly wailed. While everyone else was shocked, she seemed to be the only one who was particularly sad about Laurence’s death. If Kelly’s shock and horror weren’t genuine, she was an excellent actress. She was behaving like a woman who’d lost her lover. I hadn’t thought they were an item, but if she’d merely been hopeful, his death had dashed all her hopes which, in a way, would be worse than losing a lover. That would probably take her off the suspect list. Then again, he might have rebuffed her and she took it badly. The main thing in her favor was the fact that she wasn’t tall enough to be able to close the attic hatch, even while standing on the table. I had to stretch to do it, and she was even shorter than I was. She would have needed help.

Quentin didn’t look too heartbroken to me. He was concerned for Kelly, but he didn’t look like someone who’d just lost his best friend. He might even have been a bit relieved. And he was tall enough to close the attic hatch.

I thought Paige looked utterly shattered. This surely wasn’t how she’d imagined her grand-opening party would go. She’d hoped for enough hints of ghosts to make the inn a destination for ghost seekers, but she wouldn’t have wanted to see another ghost created during the party. She sat with her arms folded tight around herself, rocking slightly back and forth. Rick looked stoic, his jaw firmly set.

“That means one of us must have killed him,” Carole said grimly, her eyes scanning the room, as though she was doing the

same kind of assessment I'd been doing.

"Or one of the ghosts got him," Sirena said.

"Stow it, Sirena," Carole said. "Ghosts seldom have any impact on the living."

"I've already called the police," I said. "But a lot of the roads around us are flooded, so they don't know when they'll be able to reach us. They're pretty busy with high-water rescues. They suggested that we all stick together for safety until they can get to us."

"We're going to be trapped with a killer overnight?" Sirena asked, aghast. "I would rather be alone in my room than sit here with a killer. I can lock the door and be perfectly safe. No one has any reason to harm me."

Carole smirked ever so slightly. "You do realize that the killer might think you and I heard something. Laurence was killed not too far from our rooms, where we seem to have been when he was killed." She gave a sidelong glance at Quentin.

"What?" he yelped. "You think I did it?"

"Who else?" Kelly said, jumping to her feet and whirling to face him. "You were upstairs alone with him."

"I wasn't alone with him because he wasn't there," Quentin argued. "I didn't kill him."

I started to reassure him, then remembered that he was one of my main suspects. "The police will figure it out," I said instead. "There's no need to turn on each other."

"Are we sure one of us killed him?" Valerie asked.

"We're in the middle of nowhere with the roads closed," I said. "You do the math."

Everyone looked around at all the others, probably trying to decide which one was the killer. Only Brent seemed unaffected, and somewhat baffled—or possibly amused. The poor guy had really had a bad day, first driving in a torrential storm, then getting lost in said storm, getting drenched, and now finding himself in the middle of a murder investigation. He was the only

person here who was free of suspicion, since I was pretty sure Laurence was dead before he arrived.

I tried to sound authoritative. "The last time we know for certain he was alive was when he moved a table upstairs and shouted an apology." I turned to Quentin. "You're sure that was his voice you heard?"

"Yeah. I mean, I think so. If it was someone else, it was a perfect imitation, so it had to be someone who knew him well."

"So, the windows of opportunity were from when Laurence apologized until Kelly went upstairs and then during the time we were looking outdoors until Sirena and Carole came downstairs when Brent arrived. Where were each of you during that time?"

"Wait a second, why are you asking us questions?" Valerie asked. "You're not the police."

"And you found the body," Kelly put in. "Doesn't that make you a suspect?"

"Not always," I said, somewhat defensively. "And I haven't been alone in the entire time I've been here. There's no way I had a chance to get up to the attic and kill him. I just happen to be the one who checked the attic."

"Why did you check the attic?" Valerie asked, her eyes narrowing suspiciously.

I ticked off the reasons on my fingers. "One, the last thing we heard from Laurence was him moving furniture upstairs. Two, the furniture he moved was under the hatch to the attic. Three, it was the one place no one had checked. My keen investigative instincts told me to look there. And that's why I'm taking the lead here now. Have any of the rest of you been involved in a murder investigation?" I glanced around the room. No one raised a hand. "Well, I have. I've worked the crime and courts beat in a major city. I frequently work alongside the police here. I've even solved a couple of murder cases."

"Well, if that counts, then I guess I've been involved in a murder case, covering it as a reporter," Doug said. "I mean, I

covered the outcome of one.”

“You didn’t work on the investigation?” I asked, trying to think of a way to point out that doing a thirty-second stand-up hardly compared to months of in-depth reporting without outright saying that television news was generally more superficial than print.

“Okay, you’ve got me there,” he said with a shrug.

“But you’re not a cop, so what’s the point?” Kelly said to me. “It’s not as though you can arrest anyone.”

“I don’t know about you, but I’d kind of like to know who the killer is, since we’re stuck out here until the creek goes down,” I said.

“She has a point,” Quentin said. “Wouldn’t we all feel better knowing who did it? We’d be a lot safer.”

“Unless the killer figures he has nothing to lose and runs amok, killing us all,” Doug said. Everyone turned to glare at him in dismay. “What?” he said. “We’re all thinking it. At least, those of us who’ve seen horror movies.”

“You think we’re safer *not* knowing?” Valerie asked.

“I’m just saying we should leave things be for now. Stick together so it’ll be harder for the killer to pick us off and we can defend each other if he makes a move, and then let the police figure out who the killer is when they get here. Besides, we don’t have a crime lab here. How much could we do?”

“We can look at the basics of motive, means, and opportunity,” I said. “Starting with opportunity, which is why I asked where everyone was after we left the dining room. Carole and Sirena were in their rooms at that time. Did either of you hear anything?”

“Not really,” Carole said with a shrug, “but I was in the bathroom with water running. I did hear Laurence shout something. And the squirrels in the attic got really busy.”

“They aren’t squirrels. I tell you, this house is haunted,” Sirena said. “I, too, heard the spirits, but I didn’t hear any activity in the hall. Our rooms are in the rear, so we were away from the attic hatch.” That was true. The murder would have happened over the

hall, not either of their rooms.

"We were in and out of the kitchen and dining room, along with Josie and Margarita," Paige said.

"I did go out to the apartment to get the s'mores supplies," Rick said. He got a few suspicious glances, but I thought the fact that he admitted it was reassuring, and it supported my theory that if he'd killed Laurence for a good reason, he'd have owned up to it.

"I was on the front porch the whole time," Jordan said.

"So, you were alone," Valerie said.

"Someone would have seen me cross the foyer to the stairs." I noticed that he didn't mention the back stairs, but he'd have been drenched if he'd gone around that way, and I didn't want to let the others know about the secret stairs yet, so I didn't challenge him.

"We were in the library," Doug said. He glanced around. "So it sounds like the ones who were in the right place at the right time were Carole, Sirena, Kelly, and Quentin. Rick and Jordan were on their own, but they weren't upstairs."

"What did you see when you went upstairs?" I asked Quentin.

"Nothing," Quentin said with a shrug. "When I got up there, I didn't see him. There wasn't even a light. I thought he was going to prank me, jump out and make me shout, or something. I turned off my own light so I could do the same thing to him, but he didn't show up, so I came back down."

"Was the attic hatch open when you went up there?" I asked.

Quentin shook his head. "Nope. I would have noticed that."

"I was in the bathroom before I went upstairs," Kelly said. "Then I went up, and I didn't see anyone. The attic hatch was closed, and Laurence wasn't in our room. One of our cases was open, though. I think he took one of the headsets that has a lamp and a camera on it, possibly to explore the attic. We saw him outside later, didn't we?" She looked to Quentin and me.

"We saw a light outside. I think," I said. "It was hard to tell in all that rain."

"That could have been his spirit," Sirena said. She gasped and

clapped her hands together. “That’s it! We don’t need to do an investigation to find out who the killer is. We merely need to ask Laurence. We’re a group of people who are sensitive to spirits, so we should have a séance!”

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Chapter Seven

“**W**hat? No!” I blurted. “That’s no way to conduct an investigation.” And I knew that from experience. Others had talked me into doing a séance during the summer, and it had been extremely unhelpful. You couldn’t be sure what ghosts would show up. The last thing I wanted right now was people summoning ghosts in front of me. I wasn’t sure any of these people had legitimate abilities to hear or see ghosts, and I knew for certain that Sirena didn’t. What happened if I heard something they didn’t, or they claimed to hear something that wasn’t there in a way that implicated the wrong person and I had to try to contradict them? It was easy to fake a séance when no one in the group could really hear ghosts, so anyone could try to point the finger at anyone else they wanted to blame.

“This isn’t just a diversionary tactic, is it?” Doug asked Sirena. “You were alone upstairs, so you had the opportunity. What were you doing up there, anyway?”

“I went to freshen up,” Sirena said. I had to admit that she was right, her new makeup did look better in candlelight than the makeup she’d been wearing earlier. It had never occurred to me to change makeup to go with lighting conditions. “But what motive could I possibly have?”

“Laurence liked debunking you, and he even mocked your website on our show,” Quentin said.

“Yeah,” Kelly said. “You hated him. Admit it.”

“I understand, you’re grasping for answers in your grief,” Sirena said, not at all flustered by the accusations. “That is why the

séance may hold the key. Even if we can't contact Laurence, there are other spirits in the house who may have witnessed the murder and who can tell us something." I didn't think Sirena was a likely suspect, in spite of her opportunity. I couldn't imagine her being able to climb onto the table and close that hatch. She wasn't very tall or spry.

"It's not as though anything else we do is going to be official, so we might as well try it," Valerie said, sounding far too eager. I thought she was supposed to be the skeptic, but maybe that was just a role she played on television.

"Sirena, you're being ridiculous," Carole said, crossing her arms over her chest and glaring.

"Then you don't have to participate," Sirena replied. "In fact, it's better if you don't. An unbeliever might ruin everything and keep the spirits away."

Paige shocked me by saying, "Can I join in? I'm curious about what spirits might be here. It would be good for me to know what's in my hotel."

Rick turned to look at her, clearly surprised. "You sure about that, honey?"

"It'll be interesting," she said, not looking him in the eye.

"If you're trying to contact Laurence, I need to be part of it," Kelly said. "After all, I was probably closest to him. He might have something to say to me." Turning to Quentin, she added, "You can shoot it. It can be part of our tribute episode."

"If you're in, I'm in," Doug said to Valerie. To Sirena, he added, "And, yes, I've got an open mind. Look at what I do for a living."

Valerie nodded and addressed Brent. "You'll shoot it, of course." To Sirena, she said, "Where do you want to do this?"

"I think upstairs, near where he died, is best. We can sit around one of the tables. I travel with the supplies, so I'll go set up." She stood.

"Whoa, wait," I said, moving to block her. "Bad idea. We don't want a bunch of people around the crime scene, disturbing any

evidence that might be there. You could hamper the real investigation.”

“I thought the crime scene was in the attic,” Valerie said.

“The killer had to get in and out of the attic,” I said. “The more people moving around in the hall, the harder it will be for the police to find any evidence, especially if it’s one of us who did it. They won’t be able to tell when the evidence was left.”

Sirena hesitated, looking momentarily flustered, then recovered and said, “I’m sure any spirits can find us anywhere in the house. One of the tables in the dining room should work. But I still need to go to my room for supplies. I promise to stay away from the middle of the hall.”

Kelly stood and gestured to Quentin. “You shouldn’t go up alone, and we need to get some gear from our room.” The three of them headed upstairs.

“You’d better get your gear,” Valerie said to Brent.

“What do you think you’ll need?” he asked.

“Well, a camera, for starters,” she said sarcastically.

She got up and headed to the foyer, where he’d left his bags. He followed somewhat reluctantly, and Doug joined them. I had a good view of them from where I stood. I felt bad for Brent as he opened a bag and began digging around, with Valerie leaning over his shoulder, shining a light on his work and lecturing him the whole time. “Probably not a tripod in these conditions,” she said, “since you’ll need to move around, and you won’t need to rig lights because those would disrupt the séance, but I hope you’re equipped for low-light conditions. I made that very clear when the network said they were hiring a local cameraman. We need someone who’s got gear for shooting in the dark. And sound. What have you got for sound? We usually have a separate guy with a boom mike. But if you’ve got wireless mikes, we can put those on. I’d still like to get some environmental sounds like the rain and the wind howling and anything the other people might say, so let’s go with a camera boom.”

He looked up at her, and I was too far away to be able to read his expression, but I could imagine that he wasn't keen about her telling him how to do his job. He went back to taking things out of his bag.

Noticing something as he dug through the bags, she said, "Yes, those. Hand them to me and we'll get miked while you get the camera ready to go. I hope you've got extra batteries because we can't charge them with the power out."

He handed her two small black boxes wrapped in wire, and she handed one to Doug, unwound hers, stuck the end up her blouse, pulled it up through the top of her neckline, clipped a small microphone to her collar, then clipped the box to the back of her waist. Doug likewise clipped on the mike and put the pack on his belt. Brent took a small video camera out of his other bag and stood up. "Okay, ready to go," he said, but he didn't sound certain. I wondered if he knew he might end up shooting a séance when he took this job. If he was a freelancer, he probably spent most of his time on corporate events, possibly the occasional local news assignment. Ghost hunting wouldn't be part of his usual routine.

"The boom mike," Doug said. "Surely you've got one." He leaned over the bag with his lantern, dug around some more, and came up with a furry thing. "Let's go with this one." He handed it to Brent, who looked around on the camera before connecting the mike to it.

"Where did they find this guy?" Valerie asked, her mutter loud enough to carry to the parlor, so Brent surely heard it.

"We ought to get this gear away from the front door," Doug suggested, leaning down to pick up one of Brent's bags.

"No, I've got it," Brent said. Doug ignored him, carrying the bag into the dining room. Brent grabbed the other one and followed him.

Paige went after them, leaving the rest of us in the parlor. "This is ridiculous," Jordan said.

"But it does keep them in a group and out of trouble, for the

time being,” Rick said.

“It’s not a good idea to meddle lightly with these forces,” Carole said. “Especially when you don’t know what you’re doing. Which Sirena doesn’t.”

“I thought you didn’t believe,” Rick said.

“I didn’t say that. But I don’t believe that a séance will do any good, and it may do some harm. Sirena is a fraud, but a difficult kind of fraud, as she genuinely believes herself to be gifted. She’s not deliberately faking anything. She’s merely mistaken. She sees, hears, and experiences what she wishes she could. Her audience mostly consists of other people like her, people who desperately want to experience something uncanny but who have no true talent. She is occasionally correct. As they say, even a stopped watch is right twice a day. She goes to enough places other people have verified as haunted that she’s sometimes right about the presences she says she senses. But anyone who actually has sensitivity would immediately know that she’s wrong most of the time.”

“If she doesn’t have any talent, there shouldn’t be any harm in her playing medium,” Jordan said with a shrug. As he spoke, Sirena came down the stairs, carrying something filmy that streamed out behind her.

Carole turned to watch her. “She may be able to summon spirits, but that doesn’t mean she’ll be able to hear or understand them. I’d better keep an eye on the situation.” She got up and headed to the foyer, not taking a lantern with her. I imagined she was going to lurk in the darkness.

When she was gone, I asked Rick, “How did you find all these people to invite?”

“We had a PR firm working on the opening event. Inviting ghost hunters was Paige’s idea. She figured that with the reputation of the house that was the best niche to market to, and we hired a firm to invite a selection of guests who would get us the best exposure in our target demographics. Sirena reaches the

haunting lifestyle people, who would come for the aesthetic and the idea that there could be ghosts. Carole gets the high-end traveler looking for something different and off the beaten path. We reach a mid-range adult audience with *Spectral Search*—which may also get the people who think staying in a haunted place is romantic. And the Spooky Squad reaches the young, hip crowd, who might also be influencers in their own right. At least, that's what the publicist said."

"You didn't select the guests or invite them directly?"

"No. We only knew which ones had accepted the invitation."

"Were you familiar with any of these people before the event?"

"We subscribe to Carole's magazine, so we already knew about her. In fact, her column was what inspired us to market the inn as a haunted site. We did some research on the others after they accepted the invitation, reading the archive of Sirena's posts and watching a few episodes of both of the shows once we knew who was coming, so we'd be familiar with them and know what was likely to appeal to them." He shook his head mournfully. "I wish we'd done that before the invitations went out or we wouldn't have invited that Spooky Squad. We're hoping for a slightly older clientele. I don't know how many young people would want to come to a dry county so far from any kind of real entertainment. Carole's audience is much closer to what we're hoping for, the kind of people who'd enjoy a historic home in the country and a nice breakfast, whether or not they encounter a ghost."

"And they might enjoy visiting the galleries and restaurants in town, maybe take in a classic film, then come back here and wait for something mildly spooky to happen," Jordan put in.

"Were you part of the planning for the opening?" I asked him.

"No. I paid for some of the event, and I recommended the publicist, but I didn't know who was coming. I probably would have nixed the Spooky Squad if I had. Or I wouldn't have come to the party." To Rick, he said, "I have an uncomfortable personal history with Laurence. Not to the point of wanting to murder him,

but I'd have preferred to avoid him."

"Sorry about that," Rick said. "I didn't know. Maybe we should have given you the guest list." He shrugged. "Unfortunately, before we knew what the Spooky Squad was, they'd already accepted the invitation, and we couldn't turn them away. We didn't want bad publicity if they made a big deal about being uninvited." He laughed then, a sound bordering on hysteria. "So much for that! And now I *really* wish we hadn't invited them."

"Because of the death, or was it something else?" I asked.

"Laurence was unpleasant almost from arrival. You heard how he talked to Josie." He gave her a sympathetic look. "I wanted to throw him out then. But the worst thing of all was that he tried to shake us down."

I couldn't resist a glance at Margarita, since we'd speculated about that, and I found she was also looking at me. "Tried to shake you down?" I asked.

"Maybe not quite that bluntly, but he strongly suggested to Paige that it would be bad for us if they declared that the inn wasn't haunted, that it was just squirrels in the attic, or something like that, and would we want them to do that? He left it at that before dinner, so I don't know if he was going to make any demands."

"What would you have done if he had?" I couldn't resist asking.

"I'd have gone public with it in front of the others. He had as much to lose as I had with a bad report, and I don't play those games with anyone. As I said, his audience probably isn't the kind of guests we'd want, anyway. I get the feeling Carole would have been happy to mention something in whatever column she wrote about us, since he seemed to like trying to debunk her reports. I'm not even sure why, since her readers don't watch his show, and vice versa. She's also not a sensationalist. I don't think she makes up hauntings just to be exciting."

"Do you believe the house is really haunted?" Margarita asked.

"You know, before a month or so ago, I would have said flat-

out that there was no such thing as ghosts. That was why we bought this place in spite of its reputation. We didn't care because we didn't believe. But I have to admit there have been a number of strange things happening here that I can't explain. Things have been moved or have disappeared when no one else was around. There have been sounds that aren't just creaks of an old house. I wouldn't say I'm a believer, but I'm no longer a disbeliever. I've got to admit that I'm glad we don't actually live in this building. We made the decision to lean in to the haunted house thing because our experiences suggested there was just enough strangeness to satisfy people who came here for that reason, and that gave us a marketing hook."

He gave a wry grin. "And all this is making it sound like we had a motive to kill Laurence. He was possibly going to be extorting us, and another murder will only add to the house's reputation. But I assure you, I didn't kill him."

"This is going to sound weird," Josie said, "but it's kind of nice to hear that he was a jerk to other people. Now I know it wasn't just me, that I didn't do anything to make him target me."

Margarita draped an arm around her shoulders and gave her a sideways hug. "Of course you didn't do anything."

"Tonight was actually kind of liberating—I mean, before he died," Josie said. "He was really nasty at dinner, but in a way, I'm grateful to him for that because it finally broke any power he had over me. I was able to see just how pathetic he was, and I even felt sorry for him. I realized tonight that I really am over it. He may have been successful with his show and I may be working as a waitress while I'm still slowly getting through school, but I'm happy with where I am. I just wish I had some answers about why he picked on me, and unless he left diaries that someone would be willing to share with me, I'll never know."

"Maybe Sirena will be able to summon him and you can ask him," Jordan said sarcastically.

"I think I'm good," she said with a smile.

Over in the dining room, I saw the group sitting around a table. It looked a lot like the séance Margarita's grandmother had set up for me when we were trying to figure out if the person I'd been talking to at Margarita's restaurant had been a ghost. The table was draped in a filmy cloth, there was a crystal ball in the middle of the table, and there were candles around the table's perimeter. Maybe Sirena actually knew a thing or two, even if she didn't have any talent. Then again, Lupe had based what she set up on what her grandmother had done in a carnival sideshow when she was a fortune-teller, so I wasn't sure that she actually knew what she was doing. In my case, it had worked because I could talk to ghosts. It might not work for Sirena. I wondered if she'd thought to put up a salt circle to keep anything she summoned contained. It probably wouldn't be a factor if she didn't actually summon anything.

The group in the dining room held hands around the table, and Sirena began chanting. Quentin and Brent moved around the circle with their cameras. I couldn't tell that anything was happening.

"Maybe I should have joined them," Josie said, looking toward the dining room. "I'm pretty sure Laurence would come back from the dead for one more chance to make fun of me."

Rick was also watching the séance. "Is anything happening?" he asked. "It doesn't look it to me."

"I've got to admit, I'm curious," Margarita said.

"Let's go watch," Josie said.

"I'd like to see how everyone reacts to it," I said. "That may tell us something. Who's afraid of what the ghost might say?"

"You don't think our nonbeliever vibes are going to ruin it all, do you?" Jordan said with a smirk.

"I think they'll be okay," I said.

We moved into the foyer, keeping a distance from the dining room, but getting just close enough to listen. "Nonbeliever?" Margarita whispered to me as we left the parlor. "He doesn't know?"

"Nope. And I'd like to keep it that way for now. I don't think

he's very open to the idea. I also don't really want to make it public in this group."

"Yeah, I totally get that," she said with a glimpse toward where Sirena was swaying theatrically.

Carole stood in the dining room doorway, her arms crossed disapprovingly over her chest. "That idiot," she muttered under her breath.

"Laurence, speak to us," Sirena called out. "We want justice for you. Tell us who killed you."

Nothing happened.

"Laurence, I love you," Kelly blurted. "I should have told you sooner, but I thought we had plenty of time. And now it's too late. I just want you to know. Please come talk to us."

"I believe I feel a presence," Sirena said. Carole snorted.

"A presence?" Paige asked, glancing around.

"Yes, someone is here," Sirena said. "I'm sure of it. Is it Laurence? Give us a sign. Rap once if yes, twice if no."

"Table rapping? Really?" Carole muttered. "How Victorian."

Everyone at the table jumped when there were two raps. Then Doug jumped even higher when Valerie released his hand to smack him across the shoulder. "Doug, stop goofing off," she said. "You're going to ruin this."

"Sorry, sorry," he said.

She took his hand again and focused on Sirena. "Go on," she said.

Sirena gazed at the ceiling again. "We're listening," she said.

All the candles suddenly went out as a gust blew through the room.

Chapter Eight

Someone in the group gave a startled shriek. There was just enough light from the lanterns in the parlor for me to see that everyone at the table reacted, jumping back and letting go of each other's hands. Of all of them, though, it was Sirena who had the strongest response. She screamed and jumped up, knocking her chair over, nearly tripping over it as she backed away from the table. "It's here! Something's here!" she cried out.

I was a bit startled, myself. I jolted slightly, but I wasn't sure if I was reacting to the sudden darkness or the scream. I felt cold, but I didn't know if that was a ghost, a draft, or just my mind playing tricks on me. I didn't actually see any ghosts. This was nothing like the séance we'd had at Margarita's restaurant. I should have been able to see any spirit that had manifested.

Margarita grabbed my arm. "What's happening?" she whispered.

I shrugged and shook my head slightly.

A moment later, one candle came back. Brent was already on that side of the table, and Quentin moved over to film the single flickering candle. They moved around the table, and that candle went out, with another one lighting up. The two photographers followed as each of the candles around the table flickered to life, then went out, one by one, so the light circled the table.

"I told her she shouldn't mess with things she didn't understand," Carole muttered.

"You mean, that's really a ghost?" Josie whispered.

"I don't know what it is, but this is a lot like the sort of stuff

that supposedly happened here,” Rick said.

“It’s probably a draft,” Jordan said. “It’s windy, and this is an old house. It suddenly got cold, so things shrank, and that created gaps that the air could get through. Plus, there are people sitting around that table breathing right on those candles, which affects the flames.”

“So they go off and on?” Margarita asked.

“Are these your candles they’re using?” Jordan asked Rick.

“I don’t think so,” Rick said.

“Then Sirena may have special candles that give this effect,” Jordan said.

“She does tend to be theatrical,” Carole said, but I wasn’t sure if she was talking to him or to herself. “But I don’t know about perpetuating a deliberate fraud. Using trickery would mean admitting she has no real talent.”

“Are you trying to send us a message?” Sirena shouted, her voice shrill with terror as the candles continued winking on and off. If they were trick candles, then she was an outstanding actress because I thought she sounded genuinely frightened.

“Okay, you’re all seeing this? It’s not just my imagination?” Doug said.

When Brent was across the table from Doug and Valerie, she glanced at the camera, then edged closer to Doug. “I’m sure it was just the wind,” she told him, but there was the slightest quiver in her voice.

“It’s got to be a ghost or some other supernatural entity,” Doug argued, suddenly taking on his “believer” persona. “How else would you explain this?”

Both of them had changed demeanor, going from icy distance to barely restrained heat. I couldn’t tell exactly what about them changed, but I could feel the difference in mood. I could see why a big part of the appeal of their show was curiosity over whether they’d get together. Having seen them off-camera, I knew it would never happen, but if all you saw was them acting like this, you’d

be sure something was brewing.

Not to be out-acted, Kelly noticed where Quentin's camera was, then called out, "Laurence, is that you? Tell us who killed you. We'll get justice for you."

"It's not Laurence," Carole said, speaking loudly enough for the group at the table to hear. "I noticed this kind of activity long before Laurence got here. I believe it's a poltergeist, which is often the spirit of a troubled young person. Given the history of the house, there are two possibilities. It could be the lonely young man who died here after a short, tragic life or it could be the girl who was murdered here. I'm inclined to believe it's the young man, as the girl appears to be a more conventional ghost."

I found myself staring at her in surprise, along with everyone else. I had the impression from the way she talked about Sirena that she wasn't a hardcore believer. She had to be open-minded enough to write a column like hers, but she didn't appear to believe in summoning ghosts. It seemed, however, that it wasn't that she thought Sirena was nuts for believing but rather that she thought Sirena was doing it wrong.

"This is like what often happens here," Paige said, sounding more relieved than frightened. "I don't think it's a new spirit."

"This isn't the noise I heard earlier," Sirena said.

"It's also not the sound Laurence was investigating," Quentin said.

Sirena turned her chair upright and resumed her seat. Holding her hands out to either side for those next to her to take, she said, "Shall we resume? Clearly, there is someone—or something—wishing to communicate with us." The others joined hands once more. "Whoever you are, do you have a message for us?"

The candle on the side of the table where the photographers were flared up. Both of them shied away from it. Brent stepped all the way back to the wall where the windows were. The curtains flapped around him. "What the hell?" he shouted, jumping away from the window. "What's going on here?"

“Didn’t they tell you that this job was a ghost-hunting show?” Valerie said.

“Though, granted, we don’t usually have this much activity,” Doug said. “It’s mostly in the presentation.”

“It’s a ghost? For real?” Brent said, sounding like he was on the verge of panic.

“Or a draft,” Jordan said.

“I didn’t think it was real!” Brent said. He ran toward the foyer. I didn’t know where he thought he was going, with the roads closed, but maybe he preferred to sit in his truck than to be in the haunted house.

“Doug, do something!” Valerie said.

Doug rolled his eyes, but he got up and came after Brent. “Hey, what are you doing?” he asked. “You know there’s nowhere to go right now. The roads around here are flooding, and it’s too dark for it to be safe to drive. You may as well stay here. In all the shows we’ve shot, no one’s ever been hurt. Just stay back and keep the camera on us, and it’ll be okay.”

“That—what—it—” Brent sputtered, pointing in the general direction of the table in the dining room, where the candles were now all lit once more and things looked calm.

“It’s just a draft,” Jordan said. “It’s easy to let your imagination get worked up when you’re expecting to see something and when unsettling things have already happened. You’re definitely safer here than you are out there.”

Brent took a few deep breaths, and gradually the madness left his eyes. He nodded at Doug and followed him back to the table. Once Doug resumed his seat and took the hands of the people to either side of him, Sirena made another attempt at a séance.

I tried watching the reactions of the people in the room for any clues that might say something about their guilt, but it was hard to say what was going on with them. Depending on how they felt about the supernatural, they might have been merely unsettled by the possibility of an actual ghost, or they could have been worried

that it really was Laurence, who might be able to spill the beans about what had happened to him.

The person I found most intriguing was Paige. She'd been eager to participate but, as I recalled, she'd volunteered after Sirena said a nonbeliever would ruin the séance. She'd sounded glad to learn that the spirit probably wasn't Laurence. Then there was what Rick had said about Laurence possibly planning to extort them and the fact that Rick had been alone during the critical time and knew about the back stairs. Did Paige suspect her own husband? He'd said he didn't do it, but he could have been lying, and I could have been wrong about him being the sort of person who'd confess. I was basing that assumption on the fact that he'd been in the military, but not everyone in the military was the same, and they weren't all like my dad.

I glanced at Rick, trying to read him as he watched the others resuming their séance. He looked mildly curious and amused, which was a reasonable response. Or he could have found it amusing that they were going through all that without apparently suspecting him. It was hard to tell. This was when Wes would have come in handy. He had the ability to read thoughts, so he'd have been able to figure out the killer after a few one-on-one interviews, unless the killer had a very disciplined mind and was good at not thinking about what had happened.

I was starting to understand why Wes was often frustrated when I involved myself in his cases. Just about everyone here fancied themselves to be amateur sleuths, and they were all on the case, either to find the resident ghosts or to figure out who killed Laurence. We were going to end up running into each other as we investigated, possibly muddling the real facts in the process. I might have been able to puzzle it out on my own, if everyone would cooperate, but with so much confusion, it was going to be difficult.

Take this séance. If none of them had any actual ghost-spotting talent, then what they saw and heard couldn't be verified, and they

could use the event to try to pin the blame on someone else. I could prove them right or wrong, but that would mean outing myself, and there was no reason for them to believe me. It was possible that Carole had a similar talent if she knew the girl was a conventional ghost, but I couldn't be sure she'd back me up. Wes would understand how I got the information I had, but this wouldn't be his case, as it was outside his jurisdiction. I couldn't tell just any cop that a ghost had told me something.

Once Brent was shooting again, Doug and Valerie went back to radiating sexual tension. Brent kept a safe distance from the table. If it had been a ghost and not the breeze causing the disruption, it seemed to be gone now.

"We are ready to listen to you," Sirena called out. "Did you see the murder? Can you tell us who the murderer was? Was it Quentin?"

"Hey!" Quentin protested.

"I doubt the ghost has bothered to learn our names," Carole said dryly.

Sirena dropped Paige and Kelly's hands to turn and glare at Carole. "Your disbelief must be what sent the spirit away. If you're not going to help, you can get out." She pointed angrily toward the foyer.

"It's not my disbelief that's the problem," Carole said, but she shrugged and returned to the foyer.

"The candles did seem to be following Quentin," Kelly said.

"I was following the candles," Quentin corrected. "You really think I killed Laurence?"

"You were the last one to talk to him, and you were upstairs around the time he was killed."

"You've known me for years, and you really think I would do something like that?" She started to speak, but he interrupted to add, "And you do know I'm getting all this. I'm the one who edits and uploads the show, so you'll be letting all our followers know exactly what you think of me."

"I know you hate that Laurence got all the attention. I also know you like me and hate that I was interested in Laurence instead of you and kept you in the friendzone. Maybe you thought you'd stand a chance if it was just the two of us and you could comfort me."

"That is sick," Quentin said, shaking his head, but he kept his camera focused on her face. She wasn't going to come out of this looking good. I also suspected that any crush he might have had on her had just died a horrible death.

"Who else could have done it and had reason to?" she said. There were glints of light on her face as candlelight reflected from her tears.

"Well, you," Quentin said. "You were also up there alone."

"Like I could kill Laurence," she said with a scoff.

"Maybe you made a move on him and he rejected you."

"Come now, you're just upset and taking it out on each other," Paige said, her voice warm and motherly. "Don't say things you'll regret when you calm down. You don't want to ruin your friendship."

"It seems we never had one," Quentin said bitterly. "Hey, ghost, if you're still there, think you can finger the killer so I'll be off the hook? If you know who did it, you know I didn't do it."

"You're not part of the circle, so it can't hear you," Sirena said.

"Could the ghost have done it?" Doug asked. "Ordinarily, I might not have thought it was possible, but this ghost seems able to move curtains and blow out candles, and Paige said it moved stuff around, so maybe it could have done something to Laurence. It could have knocked him over or thrown something at him, or something."

"Hey, I thought you said there was no danger!" Brent objected.

"I have never heard of a spirit harming the living," Sirena said. "They exist in harmony with us, granting us their wisdom and peace."

I didn't know about harmony or peace, but I was quite familiar

with a ghost granting wisdom to the living, whether or not I wanted it. Jean would have really come in handy here. I wondered if there was a way to transport her, maybe by bringing some critical piece of the newspaper building that she was tied to with me. Though that would open up a can of worms, and I might never be able to escape her. I could call her and talk on the answering machine to tell her something, but there was no way for her to talk back to me without her being able to manipulate physical objects. She could sometimes interact with other ghosts on the spectral plane, but if she couldn't reach me to tell me what she'd learned from them, that would do no good in my current situation.

Speaking of the resident ghosts, I heard a faint sound of music coming from the direction of the parlor, as though someone was playing a piano very far away, or perhaps was playing a ghostly piano. I wondered if it was the girl I'd seen earlier and if she'd noticed anything. Unfortunately, there was no way for me to talk to her with all these people around—and without becoming the topic of a ghost-hunting show.

Carole's head also turned slightly toward the parlor, but not enough for me to be sure whether or not she heard it. The reaction that surprised me was Quentin's. He did turn to look, as though he heard something, but he quickly corrected himself. None of the others seemed to have noticed anything. Was Quentin the real ghost hunter of the group? I wondered how that might have affected their dynamics if Laurence was the one who got the attention.

All this time, Sirena had been crooning some kind of wordless invocation that sounded like slightly tuneful moaning. She was so ridiculous that it was hard to take her seriously, and I understood Carole's frustration, especially if Carole really was sensitive to ghosts and had good reason to know Sirena was wrong.

"I know you don't know our names, but you can give us a sign if you saw the murder," Sirena said.

Rick shook his head and went back to the parlor. I was torn

between watching the activity in the dining room and taking advantage of the opportunity to talk to him alone. I felt like I ought to be doing something more than just watching. The situation had slipped out of any control I might have had.

That decided it. I needed to interview Rick, who remained one of my primary suspects, so I tapped Margarita on the arm and glanced toward the parlor. She followed my glance and nodded. We joined Rick in the parlor. “Had enough séance?” he asked.

“And not enough chocolate,” I said, picking up a cookie and sitting across from him. “What did you think about all that?”

“I don’t know,” he said, shaking his head. “I guess this place really is haunted.” The girl playing the piano behind him confirmed that, but I didn’t want to bring that up. “It does make me wonder if the ghost maybe did it. That would be bad because an inn haunted by a homicidal ghost is a lot less of a draw, but it would mean that none of our guests tonight are murderers.”

Was he trying to pin the murder on a ghost? “There’s a pretty big gap between being able to blow curtains around and killing someone,” I said.

“If the ghost was what was causing some of the problems here, then it can do more than move curtains. It moves tools around, so maybe it could have hit him with something.”

That was also suspicious. It sounded like he might know something about how Laurence had died, and I’d been careful not to give anything away. Now I was glad that I’d brought Margarita with me so I wasn’t alone with him. “These cookies are amazing,” I said, deliberately changing the subject. “Which one of you is the baker?”

“Paige does the baking. She’s planning to do things like muffins and scones for breakfast, and we’ll keep fresh cookies in the upstairs hall. I man the griddle. I make some of the world’s best scrambled eggs. They’re like fluffy clouds, with some cheese thrown in.”

In spite of all I’d eaten already, my mouth began to water. If I

got stuck here overnight, I hoped he wasn't the killer because I wouldn't mind having that breakfast.

"No offense, but I hope we don't get to try them tomorrow," Margarita said. "I'd like to get home tonight."

"We'll have to have you two out sometime when we aren't full of guests to get the true experience. I feel like we owe you after the way tonight's gone. This was more than you bargained for. Josie, too."

"That would be fun," Margarita said. She sounded enthusiastic enough that I doubted she shared my suspicions about Rick.

From across the foyer, I heard Sirena call out, "If it's Paige, rap once for yes, twice for no."

I didn't hear anything that sounded like a rap. Rick chuckled. "I guess that means she both did and didn't kill him."

"If it's Rick, rap twice for yes, once for no," Sirena said.

"I thought it was once for yes," Valerie said.

"Hush. You'll dampen the spirits," Sirena said.

Two loud bangs rang out, so loud we all heard them.

Chapter Nine

“**W**hat?” Paige yelled.

“Whoa,” Rick said, his eyes widening.

The group at the table stood and they all turned to face the parlor, where Rick sat, shaking his head.

“The spirit has spoken,” Sirena intoned.

“No, it can’t be,” Paige said. “Are you sure?”

I didn’t buy that any spirit had fingered Rick, but he was high on my list of suspects. Now I wondered who was trying to set him up.

The group began moving toward the parlor, and I hoped we weren’t about to have any vigilante violence. I hurried to stand in the parlor doorway so they’d have to get past me to get to Rick, but Rick came around me to face the others.

Jordan jumped in front of Rick. “It wasn’t a spirit. It was the door,” he said. I was afraid they weren’t going to believe him, but the knock repeated while we were all still in the foyer. “See?” he added.

“The spirit could be knocking on the door to communicate with us,” Sirena said.

“That was a single knock this time,” Paige pointed out. “So it wouldn’t mean ‘yes’ anyway.”

“It’s probably someone who’s stranded on the road and looking for a safe place to wait out the storm,” Rick said, moving toward the door.

“Is that such a good idea?” Doug said. “I know it’s bad out there, but we’ve got a murder investigation going on here, and

adding a stranger to the mix might only complicate things.”

“I’m not leaving anyone stuck out there in this mess,” Rick said firmly. He peered through the etched glass set into the front door. “I think it’s a cop, anyway.”

“Oh, thank God,” Paige said, her gaze going toward heaven.

“I feel safer already,” Valerie said.

We all clustered around Rick as he opened the door. It was too dark to see much of anything other than the silhouette of someone wearing a rain poncho with the hood pushed back, but then someone behind me raised a lantern and I saw that it was Wes Mosby.

I barely stopped myself from rushing toward him and throwing my arms around him. I’m not sure I was ever so glad to see someone—well, maybe except for that time he showed up while a killer was attacking me or that other time when I was trying to stop someone from killing his wife and me. Fortunately, there were several people between Wes and me, which kept me from being able to run straight to him, since I immediately had second thoughts about his presence. While it was nice that we’d have less to worry about from the killer with an actual cop among us, him being there also meant that any investigation would be taken totally out of my hands. I’d been looking forward to handing the police a solution when they arrived, and that would have given me excellent leverage in the future when Wes tried to disregard my theories in the middle of an investigation. Now he’d take over and get the credit for solving it, no matter what I did.

On the bright side, this would probably put a stop to séances and other wacky stuff. Wes could use his own abilities to figure out exactly who the killer was, and he could then keep us safe until we could get away.

Wes’s gaze scanned the group, then rested on me once he found me. He smiled and let out a long breath with what sounded like relief. “Oh, good, this is the right place,” he said. “I’m Lieutenant Mosby, Stirling Mills P.D.”

“Come in, officer,” Rick said, stepping back to admit him. “Boy, am I glad to see you.”

Wes came inside but remained on the mat just inside the doorway while Rick shut the door. “I’m not really official, since this isn’t my jurisdiction,” he said, “but I was on the road when the call came in, and since I couldn’t get back to Stirling Mills, I thought I might be able to get here and help hold down the fort until the county constables can get here. It’s a real mess out there on the roads tonight, so they may be a while. They’re doing a lot of high-water rescues of people stranded in their cars.”

Valerie fought her way through the group to get close to Wes. “I’m so glad you’re here, officer,” she said, turning on the same sort of heat she had on-camera with Doug. “I feel much safer now.”

I was surprised by the wave of jealousy that surged through me. In all the time I’d known Wes, I’d never seen another woman making a play for him, which was why I didn’t feel like I was in any rush to make a move. Now I felt somewhat threatened. How would he react to the sexy TV star?

He frowned, his brows knitting together, as he looked at her. “Um, thanks. I hope I can help,” he said. Turning back to the middle of the group—where I was—he asked, “Is everyone okay?” Maybe I was flattering myself, but I thought he was mostly talking to me.

“Well, other than Laurence,” Kelly muttered.

“We’re all hanging in there,” I said. “We’ve been sticking together, which I hope would make things harder on the killer.”

“Or make it easier to pick us all off,” Doug said.

“We’re having a séance to see if the resident spirits can tell us who killed Laurence,” Sirena said proudly. “The spirits had just possibly identified the killer when you arrived.”

“No, they didn’t,” Jordan said. “That knock you heard was Wes arriving.”

Wes blinked and flinched. He must not have known that Jordan would be here. He had some kind of issue with Jordan, going back

to when they were friends in high school. Everyone in town knew about it, but no one, including Jordan, knew what it was about.

“Then we should resume our séance and get some answers,” Sirena said, drifting back toward the table she’d set up.

“We don’t really need to do that if the police are here, do we?” Paige asked.

“You heard the officer,” Sirena said. “He’s not here to investigate. He’s merely here to keep us safe. We can help him by telling him who the killer is.”

Wes looked toward me and raised his eyebrows. I couldn’t keep a straight face, so I hoped no one else saw my smirk.

“We still have some food on the warmer, if you’d like dinner,” Paige said. “Or do you need to see the body?”

“Is the crime scene secure?” Wes asked.

“It’s in the attic,” I said. “No one has been up there but me—and the killer, I guess. I’ve been trying to keep everyone downstairs.”

“Then I guess I could eat,” he said. “As I said, I’m not here officially, so I’m going to stay away from the crime scene. I think it’s more important that I stay close to all of you.”

“I’ll put together a plate for you,” Margarita said. “Maybe you’ll want to sit in the parlor, since they’ll be busy in the dining room.”

“That’ll be good, thanks,” Wes said.

“Let me take your raincoat,” Paige said. He pulled the poncho over his head and handed it to her. “I’ll hang this up in the kitchen so it can drip dry,” she said, hurrying off.

Margarita and Josie went to the buffet table and dished up food as the séance participants resumed their seats. Rick approached them. “Mind if I join in?” he asked. “If I’m going to be accused, I’d like to be a part of it.”

“Are you a believer?” Sirena asked.

“After what I’ve seen tonight, most definitely,” he said. Without waiting for her answer, he dragged over a chair from one of the other tables and inserted himself between his wife’s seat and

Sirena.

Jordan and Carole stood in the dining room doorway, watching the proceedings, which gave Wes and me a little privacy as we headed for the parlor. “How are things going?” he asked softly. “Don’t tell me you’ve already figured out who the killer is.”

“Alas, no,” I said with a sigh. “But I do have some theories.”

“What’s the scoop on this crowd?”

“The two kids and the victim have some kind of ghost-hunting web series. The man and woman—the one who was hitting on you—have a ghost-hunting series on one of the minor cable networks, from what I understand. I don’t really watch that sort of thing.”

“Understandably. You live it.”

“Exactly. Watching people get excited about a cold spot or static on their radio isn’t my idea of a ghost encounter.”

“And you prefer cheesy romance movies,” he said with a teasing grin.

“They’re a lot more fun. Carole, the one who was standing in back, writes a column about haunted locations for one of the big travel magazines, and Sirena, the one leading the séance, seems to have some kind of blog on the same topic.”

“I can’t believe there are that many people who actually want to hang out with ghosts. Do you think the inn really is haunted?”

I dropped my voice even lower. “It is. I’ve seen at least one ghost. I’m guessing it’s the daughter who was murdered here in the thirties. The clothes look about right for that time.”

“The question is, will they see her?”

“I don’t know. Sirena claims to be sensitive, but she dropped by the newspaper office on her way here, and Jean couldn’t get her attention. She may believe she’s got a gift, so I don’t know that I’d call her a fraud, but I wouldn’t count on her to spot ghosts for me.”

“I take it you haven’t told them about your talent.”

“Nope. And I don’t intend to. I’m here as the normal reporter. My story was going to be about the opening of a new local inn and all the people who came here for the grand opening. I was trying

to shut the supernatural out for one night so I could write a sane-sounding article without lying.”

“And then someone got killed and they started doing séances. Did anything come up?”

“Well, there was something that happened, and I’m not quite sure what it was. Candles were flaring up and going out and the curtains were blowing around, even though all the doors and windows were closed. But I didn’t see anything, not any ghosts like I usually see or even like that thing that came up from the séance we had at Margarita’s.”

Margarita brought over a plate on a tray. “I figured by now I ought to know what you like,” she said to him. Josie seemed to have stayed to watch the séance, so it was just the three of us in the parlor.

We took seats on the sofas, and before he dug in to his food, he said, “So, tell me what happened here.”

Margarita and I described how Laurence had gone upstairs, seemingly disappeared, and then I found him in the attic. “There was blood on his head, so I figure someone must have hit him with something,” I concluded. “And since it’s hard to get here, someone here must have killed him.”

“Oh, someone in the group definitely killed him,” he said between bites. “They were quite concerned about getting caught when I showed up.”

“Then it wasn’t the ghost,” Margarita said. “I was starting to wonder when it was blowing stuff around.”

“That would have been too easy,” I said with a sigh.

“Easy?” Wes asked. “That would have been an administrative nightmare, since you can’t arrest a ghost. I’d have been lucky not to be officially working the case. So, what are your thoughts on the people here?”

“Well, to start with, Laurence—the victim—is from Stirling Mills. He was Josie’s high school bully, and he was really obnoxious to her at dinner.”

“I can’t picture Josie killing anyone.”

“She didn’t,” Margarita said. “She was never alone after dinner.”

I hesitated over what to tell him about Jordan. If he knew Jordan had any motive at all, he’d jump immediately to that conclusion. But if he found out some other way, things were likely to be worse. “Jordan has a history with him, too,” I said. “It was Laurence’s dad who hit them in that car accident. Jordan was pretty shaken to see him here.”

“Oh, the victim was the kid who got caught lying?”

“Yeah. You knew about that?”

“I got an earful from my dad. He was furious about the time that was wasted over that lie. He hated that the family was put through that much more.”

“I didn’t get the impression that Jordan was all that angry now. He seemed to understand why a kid would do that, even if it was upsetting to him at the time.”

“Did they have any kind of conflict here?”

“I don’t remember them interacting. Jordan didn’t talk to him, and he didn’t pay any attention to Jordan. At dinner, he was too busy tormenting Josie. Jordan was on the front porch the whole time Laurence was missing.”

“What’s he doing here, anyway? It’s part of his tourism initiatives?”

“That, and he’s a silent partner in this inn,” I said.

He nodded. “Okay, this is all good to know. What about the others?”

“Kelly and Quentin, the other two members of that Spooky Squad team, were alone upstairs at various times around when the murder must have happened. She went up looking for Laurence, then when she didn’t find him, Quentin went up to look. She was in love with Laurence but hadn’t done anything about it. She thinks Quentin is into her and was jealous of Laurence. She flat-out accused him.”

“I take it he’s one of your suspects.”

“He’s on the list. She’s too short to have been able to close the attic hatch all the way, so if she did it, she had help.”

“Maybe they were in on it together and now she’s turning on him. What about the others?”

“Carole and Sirena were alone in their rooms upstairs. Carole said he liked to debunk places she’d said were haunted. He may have done the same thing to Sirena. So they had the opportunity and possibly a motive. I don’t think Sirena did it. She’s trying too hard to find the answer, and it doesn’t look to me like a smokescreen. I don’t think the other ghost hunters, Doug and Valerie, did it. They were downstairs the whole time. I don’t think they liked Laurence, though.”

“No one did,” Margarita interrupted.

“And they were probably rivals,” I continued, “but I didn’t get the impression they cared too much.”

“Was that their cameraman, the scruffy guy?”

“Yeah, but he didn’t arrive until just before I found the body, so I don’t think he was here when Laurence was killed. He’s a freelancer who drove down from Dallas.” I lowered my voice and added, “I don’t know where they found him, but they were scraping the bottom of the barrel. Or else maybe he’s just freaked out about driving through a storm, nearly getting caught in a flood, then arriving at his assignment to find that someone had just been killed and he’s supposed to be shooting ghosts.”

“That wouldn’t shake most of the news photographers I’ve met.”

“That may be why he’s a freelancer. Then there’s Rick and Paige.” My heart grew heavy because I had to admit that I didn’t want it to be Rick.

“They’re the owners, right?”

“Yeah. Laurence apparently hinted to Paige that it would be a bad thing if he reported that their inn wasn’t haunted, but he hadn’t gotten around to an actual shakedown. Rick had some time

when he was alone, and I get the impression that Paige is worried he did it. There's a back staircase he could have used to get to the kitchen without anyone seeing him going through the foyer and up the stairs. That isn't widely known, though."

"He's your prime suspect?"

"Well . . ." I hedged. "On paper, maybe. But if he's the killer, then he's an utter sociopath who can put it aside and not feel anything."

"I'd like to try to get him and some of the others alone to see what I can read," he said.

"I thought you were out of your jurisdiction here."

"I just want to look into it a little, mostly to keep us all safe. I'm not crazy about there being a killer among us without us knowing who it is while we're stuck out here."

"It seems you're in the same situation I'm usually in."

"No, because I'm still a licensed peace officer and I'm not interfering with anyone else's investigation."

"I think you just mispronounced 'solving.'"

"Well, I am solving someone else's investigation. I'm not getting in anyone's way, and I'll be able to hand a solution over to the county constable as soon as he can get here. But right now, that would require one of James Bond's boat cars. So, I'd like to start with Quentin and Rick. If I don't get anything from them, I can move on to the others."

"Formal interviews?" I asked.

"No, since I don't want to compromise the investigation. I just want to get alone with some of them so I know who I'm reading." He gave me a funny look, then said, "You know, you never said where you were when it happened. Since I can't read you, how do I know you didn't do it?"

I couldn't tell if he was teasing me. I was pretty sure he was, but he was being so dry about it that I couldn't help but doubt. "I had no motive, and I was never alone since I got here. Same with Margarita."

“Of course, you two would cover for each other.” Now I was pretty sure he was teasing. He was having a hard time keeping a straight face.

“We aren’t even each other’s alibis,” Margarita said. “I was with Paige, Rick, and Josie, working that whole time. Lex was in the parlor with Quentin, with Valerie and Doug in the next room, and we could see her from across the foyer. Nice try, but you’ll have to find some other excuse to lock us up.”

A loud scraping sound came from upstairs, as though something was being dragged across the floor.

“That’s the same sound we heard just before Laurence disappeared, when he dragged the table under the attic hatch.” I said.

“I thought everyone was supposed to stay together,” Wes grumbled. We got up and headed across the foyer, only to run into the group from the dining room, who’d also heard the sound. The sound came again, like whoever it was up there had needed to give one more good shove. I counted heads in the foyer, and no one was missing. Someone—or something—was up there.

Chapter Ten

“It’s Laurence,” Kelly whispered, her gaze going upward. “He’s trying to reach us.”

You could tell this was a gathering of ghost hunters. Most normal people who heard noises upstairs when everyone was downstairs and a person had already been killed in the attic would probably just stay downstairs. This crowd ran up the stairs. Wes darted through them to get ahead of them and then shouted, “Hold it!” He sounded so authoritative that they actually stopped. “I don’t want anyone up there messing around with the crime scene.”

“But there’s a ghost up there,” Valerie said. “That’s why we’re here.”

“It’s Laurence,” Kelly insisted. “That’s the same sound he made just before he died.” The last word came out as a sob.

“If we’re all down here, then who’s up there?” Paige asked.

“That’s what I’m going to find out,” Wes said, taking his flashlight off his belt. “But everyone else needs to stay down here.”

I was pretty sure that didn’t apply to me—at least, I was going to pretend it didn’t—so while they were all grouped in the foyer, I slipped through the dining room to the kitchen. It took me a moment to find the door to the hidden stairs in the dim light of the camping lantern that was sitting on the counter. I grabbed the lantern to light my way. It was worse going up the stairs than it had been going down them, and it didn’t help that I only had one hand free while I carried the lantern, so I couldn’t steady myself as well against the walls. I had a moment of panic at the top when I wasn’t able to get the door to open from the inside, but I

eventually found the catch and emerged from the staircase just as Wes reached the top of the stairs. He must have been delayed by having to argue some more with the others.

If the situation had been less fraught, I might have been more amused by the way he jumped when he saw my lantern. "It's just me," I whispered.

"Lex, what are you doing up here?" he asked, sounding a little short of breath. I must have really scared him.

"I thought I ought to show you those back stairs and point out the situation up here. Since I found the body, my evidence is already around the crime scene."

He pointed his flashlight around the hall. "Okay, show me."

The first thing I noticed was that one of the balcony doors was open and swinging back and forth in the wind. "I was the last person up here," I said. "I had to go out on the balcony to call the police—the roof's metal, so reception up here is terrible—but I'm sure I closed and bolted the door. At least, I'm pretty sure. Maybe I just closed it. I was a little rattled."

"Understandably, but you ought to be getting used to finding bodies by now."

"This is only my second," I said. "Margarita and I sat up here for a little while longer before facing them all downstairs, and the door didn't blow open then."

It took both of us to get the door shut, the wind was so strong. "I can see why it might have blown open, no matter how well you shut it," Wes said once the door was closed and bolted. He then turned to look at the rest of the hall. "So, what's been moved up here?"

I couldn't immediately tell what had made the noise. None of the furniture seemed to be out of place. But then I looked up and found the attic hatch. The table was no longer beneath it. It had been moved a few inches to the right. "There, that's it," I said, pointing to the table. "That's the one Laurence moved under the attic hatch, so he could reach it, I guess. Or else the killer moved it

and Laurence caught him. Anyway, you can see the scrapes on the floor.”

Who could have moved it? We had all been downstairs when we heard the scraping sound. I might have thought someone from the séance group had slipped upstairs and then made it back down, perhaps through those secret back stairs, but I’d had a good view of the whole group while I heard the second scrape, so I knew no one in the group had done it. Could it have been a ghost? The ghosts I’d dealt with couldn’t do much with the physical world. Jean made people uncomfortable, and she could make paper blow around with some effort. She’d never be able to move furniture. Whatever it was that the séance had summoned had made curtains flutter, but could it have moved a table?

As though he’d been reading my thoughts—which was a possibility—Wes leaned his hip against the table without it budging and asked, “Could there be someone else in the house? Or do you think it really is a ghost?”

“I’ve never heard a ghost make that kind of racket when they’re not shouting at me, but I’m not exactly an expert on all kinds of ghosts, and most people don’t hear anything Jean does. The table’s pretty heavy. It’s one thing for a ghost to be able to make curtains flutter, but it’s an entirely different thing for it to move a marble-topped table with a cast iron base.”

“We’d have seen anyone running down the stairs. Or could they maybe be able to get into the rooms?”

“I thought you said someone in that group definitely killed Laurence.”

“They did. But someone else could be moving things around.”

“You know, getting them to let you into their rooms one by one would give you an excuse to read them.”

He grinned. “Okay, if it were really my case I might find you annoying, but right now, I like the way you think.”

“It’s not any different from the way I usually think.”

“Yeah, but usually you’re getting in my way instead of

helping.”

“Hey, I’ve pretty much handed you some solutions on a silver platter.”

“And I’ve had to come to your rescue.”

“I had things totally under control. I just needed someone to come make the official arrest.”

He started to respond to that when the balcony door flew open, slamming back so loudly that it made both of us jump. I jumped toward him, which threw me against him. That must have startled him into a reflex because he tightened his arms around me. I didn’t mind. He was warm and solid, and it was reassuring to be held so securely. I waited for him to realize what he was doing and release me, but he didn’t.

“So, wind?” I ventured after a moment.

“I know I bolted the door. It didn’t just fly open on its own.”

We both turned to watch the door swinging in the wind. Outside, the rain continued pouring. “If the ghost could move the table, it could easily turn the bolt.”

“Yeah, probably.” He finally released his grip on me, and I reluctantly stepped away from him as he moved to shut and bolt the door again. “But why? Is it just being a pain, acting out to get attention, or is it trying to tell us something? You’re the ghost expert here.”

“We’ve got a house full of ghost experts.”

“You’re the one I know is legit.”

His faith in me gave me a warm glow. “Like I told you, this one is different. There’s nothing to talk to. I’m not hearing or seeing anything.”

“Have you tried?”

“We probably better start checking these rooms.”

“Lex?”

“I’ll head down the back stairs and hope no one noticed I was gone.”

I hurried away before he could push the point. Being around all

those professional ghost hunters had made me really uncomfortable about my gift, and I didn't want to end up on one of their shows, claiming to be able to talk to ghosts. I had no desire to end up like Sirena or Doug. I made it down the stairs and turned off my lantern before I opened the door into the kitchen. I groped my way through the kitchen in the darkness and found that the group was still milling about in the foyer. I reached them just as Wes came down the stairs and said, "Someone moved the table that was under the attic hatch."

"But we were all down here," Doug said.

"I know, but is there a chance there's someone else in the house?"

"I would have said no one could get here tonight, but you managed it," Rick said.

"I'd like to check each of the rooms," Wes said. "With the person staying in the room, of course."

"I thought we weren't supposed to split up," Kelly said. "I don't want to be alone upstairs with anyone."

"He's a cop, and he wasn't here when it happened," Quentin said.

"That we know of," she said darkly. "Do we even know for sure he's a cop?"

"He's real," I said. "I've run into him too many times during police matters."

"Maybe you're in on it, too."

"He's a regular at my restaurant, and I knew his father and know his grandmother," Margarita said.

"We went to high school together," Jordan added.

"It would be a pretty big conspiracy if we were all in on it," I said.

"Okay, so you're a real cop, but cops have been known to kill. I'm not going alone into a room with anyone," Kelly said. "I need at least one other person there."

"You have a good point," Wes said. "Lex, would you mind

joining us?”

I was the only person who could come along without ruining the whole point, since he couldn't hear my thoughts and knew I wasn't the killer, so he could be certain that any mental confessions he heard came from the subject. “Sure,” I said.

Kelly seemed somewhat appeased by that, but that wasn't necessarily a good thing, since Quentin was more of a suspect. He was the one Wes needed to read.

“You don't have to go, though, if you're not comfortable going up there,” I said. “Quentin could do your room.”

“Yes, you go,” she said to Quentin. “And shoot it, while you're at it.”

“Hey, if they get to shoot it, then we get to send our cameraman,” Doug said.

“No cameras,” Wes said. Although Brent was in the clear, having an additional person in any of the groups would ruin things.

“There's no point in all this fuss,” Carole said. “We can check my room first.” She headed up the stairs, moving right past Wes. Both of us had to hurry to catch up with her. Her room had once been a sleeping porch, an upstairs balcony with screened sides to catch the breeze during warm summer nights before air conditioning. The windows were now glassed in. There were drapes hanging at each corner for those who wanted to sleep past sunrise, but they were pulled back now. It was probably a cheery space in daylight. At night during a thunderstorm it had an entirely different mood. It was like being out in the storm without getting wet. Every flash of lightning lit up the whole room.

“I was enjoying sitting in here earlier,” Carole said. “It's like having a front-row seat to the storm. But that's not why we're in here now.” She turned to open the wardrobe that stood against the wall that connected to the hall, but all that was in there was a couple of dresses and a sweater. The small bathroom was also empty.

Just to be thorough, Wes got down on the floor and checked under the four-poster bed. “Well, there’s no one in here,” he announced. “Was there anything you noticed when you were in your room earlier?”

“I didn’t kill him, if that’s what you’re getting at,” she said. “I know I was by myself and upstairs, so I had the opportunity, but I most certainly did not do it.”

“What kind of relationship did you have with Laurence?” Wes asked. “I understand you had issues with him.”

“I’m sure almost everyone he encountered had issues with him. He was a deeply unpleasant person.”

“What about professionally?”

She gave a haughty sniff. “I’m not sure the word ‘professional’ applies where he’s concerned. And that was the problem. I don’t think he was a ghost hunter because he truly cared about the spiritual realm. He was in it for attention. He loved to play the spoiler. If I wrote a column about a haunted hotel, he’d soon do a show about that site, supposedly proving that it wasn’t really haunted.” She narrowed her eyes and gave Wes a steely glare. “I can assure you that if I say a location is haunted, it most certainly is.”

“His behavior must have bothered you.”

With a dismissive wave she said, “I’ll admit it was annoying, but it meant nothing. We had very little audience crossover. I write for a high-end, established publication. My readership is the sort of people who still subscribe to actual magazines, the kind printed on paper that come in the mail each month. They aren’t people who watch web series about hipsters with gadgets. His actions had almost no bearing at all on my work. Therefore, I had no reason to want him dead. He’ll get far more attention dead than he deserves, and his murder—assuming that’s what it was—will only make his show more popular, so more people are likely to view old episodes and give his false conclusions the veneer of legitimacy.”

“Since you’re familiar with him and his work, do you know if

the others in your, uh, field feel the same way?"

"I'm not sure that Laurence debunking Sirena's reports would have much impact on her audience. They'd believe her over him because they identify with her. That's how she makes a living. She sells lifestyle accessories: candles, crystals, jewelry, and the like. Even clothes. Her followers can model themselves on her. The haunted travel articles merely bring in the traffic to sell all these other things to. It's content marketing."

"And the TV people?"

"I'm not familiar with their series. I have encountered them at other events like this. My read on them is that they're actors with no sensitivity or interest in the topic. They walk around in spooky-looking places, act scared, and jump into each other's arms while they're being filmed, giving the illusion that they're always one good scare away from acting on their feelings for each other."

"I suppose it's time for the next one," Wes said. He waited for Carole to lock her door before escorting her down the stairs.

Sirena went next, and she dramatically flitted around the room behind Wes, talking the whole time. I wondered what he was reading from her because I doubted she left a thought unspoken. "I don't think the Spooky Squad is at all authentic, but I held no ill will. I had no reason to want Laurence dead, if that's why you really wanted to come up here with me." She lowered her voice. "I do know that he has targeted Carole to try to undermine her credibility. She was alone in her room the entire time—or so she says. I might have heard her door opening and closing, but I can't be certain."

I couldn't believe that she was throwing Carole under the bus. "You think Carole killed him?" I asked.

"I didn't say that. I was merely mentioning that she had a motive, and she had opportunity. Whether or not she was physically capable of murder, I don't know. A lot would depend on the means of death. She's certainly tougher and more fit than she lets on. Don't let that sweet little old lady act fool you. She thinks

she's Miss Marple. In fact, I'd bet she's downstairs doing her own investigation by asking innocent-seeming questions, and people will reveal far more than they realize with their answers. If you don't solve the case soon, she'll beat you to it."

"She solves mysteries?" I asked, getting an uncomfortable glimpse of my own future. Would I end up like Carole, writing columns about haunted hotels that no one would really believe and solving the occasional crime along the way? I was afraid that was what awaited me if my journalism career got derailed.

"Well, she has to do something, since she's so resistant to spirits. Her columns do capture the atmosphere of the places she reviews, but she never explicitly mentions ghostly encounters. It's all about whether a place *feels* like it could be haunted. She wouldn't recognize an actual ghost if one shouted 'Boo!' right in her face."

I very nearly burst into laughter because that exact scenario had happened to Sirena. I barely held it back, and that turned it into a coughing fit. Wes patted me on the back until I could breathe again.

"This building is definitely full of ghosts," Sirena went on, oblivious to my discomfort. "Have you considered that Laurence might have been slain by one of the resident ghosts? The killer might not have been human at all."

"Ghosts can kill people?" Wes asked.

"Spirits who are strongly motivated can do a great deal. We are all guests in the home of these ghosts. It is possible that Laurence trespassed upon space they considered theirs." She gave a haughty sniff before adding, "I told Carole that the attic was haunted. She insists that attics aren't haunted because people don't live in attics, and therefore their spirits wouldn't be attached to one."

"That's an interesting perspective," Wes said mildly.

"One you should keep in mind," Sirena said, wafting out of the room.

We didn't find anything in either Valerie or Doug's rooms—and

they did have separate rooms. They also weren't all that eager to talk, merely standing near the door and waiting while Wes searched. Wes shook his head silently to me as we came down the stairs.

Quentin went last. The Spooky Squad room didn't look like it had been touched since the last time I'd gone in there with Kelly. There was no one in the closet, the bathroom, or under the beds. While Wes searched, Quentin dug in the open bag still sitting on the floor. "I hope we've got the second headset," he said. "That would make shooting a lot easier. Did you see the headset with Laurence?"

"I don't know," I said with a shake of my head. "I didn't really look for details. I didn't want to disturb the scene any more than was absolutely necessary."

"Here it is," he said, taking out a band with a square box on it. There was a decal with the Spooky Squad logo, like on their van, on the band. He put it on, and the box sat on his forehead.

"Looks like this room is clear," Wes announced as he returned to us.

"I'm your suspect, right?" Quentin said. "I know everyone heard me snapping at Laurence earlier, and I'll admit that I could get really frustrated with him. He was kind of a jerk."

"Then why did you keep working with him?" I asked.

Quentin shrugged. "It was a job, and a fun one. I studied engineering, and I'm sure I could have gotten a decent job, but I'd be sitting at a desk most of the time, doing the nine-to-five thing. Instead, I'm getting to travel, we're making really good money, and I'm having fun. I have the time to tinker and invent. That wouldn't have happened without Laurence, and I'm not sure it'll keep happening without him. He was the one who got stuff done. I don't have those skills."

"What skills do you have?"

"I'm the tech guy. I come up with the gizmos that help us hunt ghosts. I also do the editing and special effects."

“Do those gizmos actually work?” I couldn’t resist asking.

“I take it you’re not a believer,” he said, and I could barely keep a straight face. I didn’t dare glance at Wes to see how he was reacting.

“And I assume you are,” Wes said.

“I’m in the wrong line of work if I’m not. But I have scientific proof that there’s something. I’ve developed a sensor that picks up on a particular spectrum of energy that’s present around spirits. I’ve also got a camera rigged that can capture that visually.” He held up the gizmo he carried on a strap over his shoulder. “According to this, there’s no spectral activity up here. Either there really isn’t a ghost, or it’s currently downstairs.”

Although I knew I could see and hear ghosts, I had to admit that I was skeptical about being able to prove it scientifically. If he really could do that, he’d have managed to achieve something that people had been trying to do for centuries. My guess was that he was like me and could see ghosts, and he used his devices to explain what he detected. The camera was probably fake and he added special effects. It was true in that he was depicting something he really saw, but the footage wasn’t real. I desperately wanted to introduce him to Jean.

“Was there anything else going on that might have made someone want to kill Laurence?” Wes asked.

Quentin paused, working his jaw back and forth and shifting his weight. “Well, there had been some weird stuff lately. Like, my gear had shown there were ghosts. I knew a place was haunted. We saw evidence. But he would insist on the episode being edited to show it was a dud, no hauntings anywhere. He’d say we needed to show that we don’t always find ghosts so that people will believe us when we say we found a ghost. And sometimes he’d make me re-edit to show that the place was haunted right before it was time to upload, like he’d changed his mind. I’m not sure what was up with that.”

“But you went along with it?”

“There wasn’t much point in arguing with Laurence.”

“Did you have any suspicions?”

“You’re trying to find a motive for me to have killed him, aren’t you? I was jealous over Kelly, or maybe I thought he was up to something fishy that was going to ruin us if anyone found out. And I seem to have been the last person to talk to him alive. I went upstairs and was alone up here around the time he was killed. I’m big enough to have done it. I know how it all looks. But I swear to you, I did not kill him.” He looked Wes straight in the eye as he said it.

“If you didn’t, who do you think did?”

He broke eye contact and shrugged. “No idea.”

“You have no theories at all?” Wes pressed.

“Sorry, no.”

“Okay, then. We’re done here.”

I wondered if Wes had read something, but he shook his head when I caught his eye. I was afraid that meant Rick was the killer.

Chapter Eleven

“Well, there doesn’t seem to be anyone upstairs,” Wes announced when we got back to the foyer.

“Then who was moving the furniture around?” Valerie asked.

“The ghost,” Sirena said.

“I didn’t get any readings up there,” Quentin said.

“The ghost wasn’t doing anything up there while you were there. I think it came back down here to try to communicate with us,” Sirena said.

“I honestly don’t know what’s going on,” Wes said. “But I think this makes it even more important that we all stick together, and I’d like us to all stay downstairs for the time being. I know it’s getting late and you’d like to be in your beds, but I’d feel a lot better if we could all see each other.”

“Do you think we’re in any danger, officer?” Carole asked.

“I can’t say, since we don’t know why Laurence was killed. That makes a difference. If it was personal, then the rest of us might not be targets—unless perhaps the killer feels like he might be exposed. If it was a crime of opportunity, then we could still be at risk.”

“And if it’s a psycho serial killer, he might pick us off one by one,” Doug said, sounding a bit too enthusiastic about that.

Valerie gave him a good whack on the shoulder. “Stop it! That’s not helping.”

What we needed was a way to get Wes alone with Rick, who was the most likely suspect now. I couldn’t think of a good excuse, since Rick didn’t have a room in the house that Wes needed to

search. If Wes asked for food or drink, Margarita and Josie were handling the catering. Wes had just said we all needed to stick together, so asking to speak to anyone alone would probably put the killer on alert.

“What about the attic?” Kelly asked. “Could someone be hiding up there?”

“The table’s been moved—not far, but enough to make it harder to reach the latch,” Wes said. “Would anyone have been able to reach the attic door without it?”

“Someone could have climbed up, opened the hatch and unfolded the stairs, then moved the table back, and then climbed the stairs and pulled the hatch up after them,” Quentin mused.

“I don’t know if anyone could pull the stairs up after them from inside the attic,” Rick said. “I’ve never tried, and I don’t know if you can open it from inside the attic once you’re up there.”

“Would they have had time to do all that between the time we heard the table being moved and the time you went up the stairs?” I asked Wes. “You got up there pretty quickly, maybe less than thirty seconds. Between the time we heard the noise and the time you got up there, someone would have had to go up the stairs and pull them back up.”

“Depending on how easy it is to pull the stairs up, it might have been possible,” Quentin said.

“What’s in the attic?” Doug asked.

Rick shrugged. “I have no idea. I’ve never gone up there. I’ve been too busy with the rest of the house. I don’t think there is anything. The previous owners redid the decking and had the solar shield put in, and that would have required anything that had been in there to be moved. Whatever used to be in the attic is in the barn. We got a few pieces of furniture from out there. We haven’t started storing anything up there yet. Once we start getting holiday decorations, that’ll probably be what goes in there.”

“There was nothing but Laurence and a few drop cloths when I found Laurence,” I said.

“I think we’d better check up there,” Doug said. “We need to be sure there’s no one hiding up there.”

“And who knows what they might be doing to Laurence,” Kelly added.

I didn’t have to be a mind reader to tell that Wes was considering that this might be an excuse for him to be alone with Rick. He could ask for his help getting into the attic. But then that might mean bringing the killer to the crime scene, which would contaminate it, since it would be hard to tell when any evidence had been left. On the other hand, Rick worked in this house, so his DNA and fingerprints were probably all over the place—except inside the attic, if he’d been telling the truth.

Wes got a foot on the bottom step and was opening his mouth to say something when Quentin called out, “Y’all, I think we’ve got a ghost down here. I mean, in addition to the activity that was already here during the séance. This is something different.” He held his electronic device up as though he was reading something from it, but his gaze was focused on the dining room. I would have thought he was deliberately distracting Wes from looking at the attic, but the ghost I’d seen earlier was making its way from the dining room toward the parlor, carrying a spectral mug. It seemed the afterlife had hot cocoa or warm milk, which was nice to know. I couldn’t tell if Quentin’s device really did detect the ghost or if he used that to cover up for the fact that he actually saw a ghost. Either way, he was right.

He pressed a button on the box on his forehead and followed the ghost, and all the others came after him. “Shoot! Shoot!” Valerie shouted at Brent. It seemed to take him a moment or two to figure out what she meant. “This is what we’re here for,” she added, moving closer to Doug and turning on the sexual tension.

Doug glanced toward Brent to make sure he was shooting before he said, “It looks like the resident ghost has made an appearance.”

“I didn’t see anything,” Valerie said, now in her character as the

resident skeptic.

Margarita caught my eye and grinned as we followed them. Wes moved up next to me and leaned over to whisper, "Is it legit?"

I nodded.

The ghost moved through the parlor to the library, where she spent some time browsing the bookshelves, seemingly oblivious to her audience.

"There is definitely a presence here," Sirena said, moving through the library with her arms held out and her lace sleeves draping dramatically. "I sense it, and it's angry." I had to bite my lip to keep from laughing, since the ghost was calmly looking at books. Sirena raised her voice and called out, "Spirit, make yourself known. We can help you." I noticed that she'd managed to drift right into range of Brent's camera. It looked like she was aiming for a guest spot on the show. I wondered if she sold dresses like the one she wore and was modeling it for the camera.

"Do you mind?" Valerie snapped. "We've got a show to make and you're ruining our shoot."

Kelly pulled out her phone. "You're not the only one with a show. We're shooting this, too. It was our colleague who was killed. We owe it to him to solve his murder." She held up her phone and walked around the room, going nowhere near the ghost.

Turning back to Brent's camera, Valerie said, "We can edit that out." She went back into character and edged closer to Doug, angling so that Kelly wasn't in their shot. "This room seems colder than the others. The heat must be out because of the storm," she said, the slightest hint of a quiver in her voice. Nearby, Jordan had a coughing fit. The temperature had dropped with the storm, but it was nowhere near cold enough to turn on the heat.

"Cold spots usually mean a ghost," Doug said. "There's something in this room."

The curtains at the rear of the room billowed like they'd done in the dining room during the séance, very close to where the ghostly girl stood. I couldn't help but wonder if all the spectral

activity we'd seen wasn't aimed at us, after all. Was one ghost trying to get the other ghost's attention? Were these people trapped on different planes of the afterlife, not able to interact with each other?

She didn't seem to notice anything, either us or the other ghost. It was like she was stuck in a loop, living out her usual days in this house without being aware of anything else that was going on. If I'd been alone, I might have tried to speak to her, but I wasn't about to add another ring to the current circus.

The girl selected a book—she had one in her hand, but the actual shelf remained untouched—and she left the library through the door that led directly to the hall. Quentin consulted his device and said, “Looks like it's on the move.” He followed the girl, and everyone trooped after him. I was tempted to leave through the parlor and meet them in the foyer, since I suspected the girl was heading upstairs, but then realized that might give away that I was seeing something.

“It's going upstairs,” Quentin said, and the group went up the stairs after him.

“Wait, no, let's stay down here,” Wes called out, but it was a lost cause. All the ghost hunters, along with Rick and Paige, went up the stairs.

With a heavy sigh, Wes said, “I guess I'd better keep an eye on them,” and headed up. Josie, Margarita, and I followed him.

I glanced back at Jordan. “Coming?” I asked.

“To hunt ghosts? Seriously?”

“Do you really want to be entirely alone right now?”

“Good point.” He came halfway up the stairs, but stopped there.

“I think it's in your room, Sirena,” Quentin called out from in front of her door near the top of the stairs.

“I knew I felt a presence,” Sirena said, hurrying to her door. “I'll open the room, and we can investigate.”

She unlocked the door, and the ghost hunters rushed in after her, joined by Rick, Paige, and Josie. Wes moved closer to me and

whispered, "Did you see anything?"

I got as close to him as I could and whispered, "It's the one I saw before."

"We'd better see what's going on in there."

When we got up the stairs and paused in the doorway, Sirena was holding court in the middle of the room, holding a crystal over her head and chanting. The ghost lay on the bed, reading her book, drinking her cocoa, and totally ignoring Sirena. Carole stood by the window, watching Sirena and smirking. Quentin moved around the room's perimeter, facing the ghost the whole time.

Brent and Kelly filmed Sirena. Valerie and Doug stood behind Sirena, in line with Brent's camera, close enough to each other to almost touch. Josie, Rick, and Paige stood against the wall adjacent to the door. Paige kept several inches between herself and her husband, and unlike the actor ghost hunters, there was no sense that they might touch at any moment. It was a lot of people to be crammed into a relatively small room that was mostly filled with a four-poster bed.

"Speak to us, oh spirit!" Sirena called out. "How can we help you? Do you need to move on? Is there a wrong that must be set right in order for you to get your rest?"

"Did you kill Laurence?" Kelly called out. "Why did you hurt him?"

The ghost ignored them. I wasn't even sure she could tell there were people around her. Wes backed away from the room, and I joined him. "At least this is keeping them out of trouble," he whispered with a wry smile. We rejoined Jordan and Margarita, who had stayed with him on the stairs.

"So, they scared up something?" Jordan asked. "I bet your job would be a lot easier if you could interview the victims to find out who killed them."

"Until then, I have to interview the suspects. I understand you had a history with Laurence."

Margarita reacted more strongly than Jordan did. I heard her

sharp intake of breath as she moved as though to intervene between the two men.

“So, you heard,” Jordan said with a glance at me. “Yeah, Laurence was the kid who lied about what happened in the accident, and it didn’t seem as though he’d improved with age. I was willing to cut him some slack when I first got here and recognized him. I mean, he was just a kid then, and he was trying to protect his dad. He’d also been through a pretty traumatic accident, himself, and it’s possible that he didn’t remember it correctly. But then he was a total jerk to Josie at dinner. However, I don’t consider being a jerk a capital offense.”

Wes muttered something under his breath. I thought I heard something like, “Lucky for you,” but I wasn’t entirely certain. Out loud, he said, “And the business?”

“I’m a semi-silent partner. It’s not meant to be a secret that I provided some of the funding to get the inn going, but I don’t want my name on it. It’s a small investment, and I’ve got it set up so that any profits made from my share will be reinvested for the first few years, at which point we’ll revisit the agreement and decide whether they want to buy me out or start giving me dividends.”

“So, you have a financial stake in this business.”

“A very small one, from my perspective. It’s money I can afford to lose. It’s definitely not make or break. I’ll come out ahead if this inn is a success, but less because of my direct investment and more because it might bring more people to town, which would bring more business to some of my other ventures.”

“Did Paige and Rick discuss Laurence’s possible extortion scheme with you?”

“Yes, and we decided we didn’t care. They’re trying to appeal to an entirely different demographic. A bad review from the Spooky Squad wouldn’t have made much difference, especially if Carole did give a good report, and she’d already told them she was certain the house was quite haunted. Sirena was also pretty enthusiastic and sure there were spirits here.” He gave a soft snort. “Not that

any of it's real. But I'm just happy if the kind of people who want to feel the presence of ghosts are likely to feel something."

A bright light suddenly appeared just above us, blinding me. All of us jumped, startled, but then a moment later, Valerie passed us on the stairs, carrying one of the LED lanterns and heading down toward the dining room. My eyes had adjusted to the darkness and I was left seeing spots.

"Just like that," Jordan said. "If you're thinking about ghosts, your first thought would have been that the flash of light was supernatural. If you never saw the lantern, you'd keep thinking that. It wouldn't take much for people to feel like they'd had a true experience here."

"I guess you're not a believer," Wes said to Jordan.

"I think it's all in their heads. But whatever floats your boat, you know?"

"You were on the porch alone after dinner?"

"Are you actually interrogating me like a suspect?"

"I'm being thorough, and I can't disregard you just because I've known you a long time when you don't have an alibi."

"Yeah, I was on the porch. I wanted to check in with my family and let them know I might not be coming back until the next morning if the storm doesn't let up. And I wanted to see if they had power. Mom still worries about me. The cell signal inside the house is terrible, so I went out to get a stronger signal."

"Sounds like you were out there talking a long time."

"You've met my mother," Jordan said dryly.

"Right," Wes said with a hint of a smile in his voice. It was the first time his hostility toward Jordan had ever slipped since I'd known him. I couldn't help but wonder what Jordan's mother was like. I hadn't yet met his family.

"Anyway, I was still out there when Lexie and the Spooky Squad people came out there looking for Laurence."

"Did you see anything during that time?"

"No, but I didn't know to be looking for anything. I just saw

rain and the occasional bit of lightning. Then I came in with everyone else, and we were all together in the parlor until Lexie said she'd found Laurence's body."

"So you're saying you didn't kill Laurence, either in revenge for his lie after your accident or to protect your business interests?" The hostility was back in full force, like Wes had willed it to return.

"Seriously, Wes? You've known me since we were kids. We were even friends once. I don't know what made you change your mind about that, but you've got to believe that I'm not capable of murdering just to get ahead."

"You're capable of lying and cheating, so murder isn't much of a stretch." There was a bitter tone to Wes's voice.

"Lying and cheating? Okay, this has gone on long enough. What is your deal? What do you think I did? Why did you go from my best friend to my worst enemy all at once?"

"Senior year math class. You were the only one who got a perfect score on the test. How did that happen?"

Jordan swayed, and I thought for a moment that he might faint. I moved so I could catch him before he tumbled down the stairs. "How did you know? No one knew."

"You cheated."

"Yeah, I found the answer key on the teacher's desk and got a good, long look, so I also got the extra credit trick question that tripped everyone else up. But what's the big deal?"

"But do you remember how tight the class rankings were? That exam was the difference between the top two places. The extra credit made up for another test you struggled with."

"You're mad at me because I cheated you out of being valedictorian?"

"And the free tuition for an entire year that came with it. Which you didn't even use because you didn't go to a state school. I really could have used it. I wouldn't have had to work during my freshman year if I'd had that."

Jordan's jaw dropped. "I didn't think about that." For a moment, he looked truly guilty, but then he recovered his composure and said, "You think I should have shared that key with you so you could have cheated, too?"

"No! But you could have tried to solve those problems honestly. You could have skipped the extra credit if you couldn't really work the problem. You wouldn't have had a perfect score if you'd done that, would you?"

"No. Because that one problem was a trick. But I don't see how you know about this. I never told anyone."

"I noticed some things," Wes said with a shrug.

"And you've hated me all this time because I beat you out of valedictorian."

"By cheating."

"But still . . ."

"I'm mad because I felt betrayed. My best friend did something dishonest without thinking about what it would do to me. You wouldn't even admit it to me. And you were awfully smug about it. You rubbed it in that you'd won."

"I did," Jordan admitted. "By the end of the school year, I wasn't even thinking about that test anymore. I guess I let myself believe I got it honestly. Look, man, I'm sorry. I guess I was a lousy friend. I wouldn't have done it if I'd realized the difference it would make to you."

Margarita cleared her throat, like she was hinting that it was Wes's cue to say something. I figured Wes might need some time to process this. He'd held that grudge a long time, and I wasn't sure that the confession made it any better.

Before he could say anything—if he was going to—Josie came down the stairs, carrying a lantern that blinded me again. "Ghost hunting isn't that interesting after the initial surprise," she said. "I'm going for a snack. Anyone want anything?"

We all declined, and she went the rest of the way down the stairs.

A moment later, a scream came from the dining room.

“That’s Josie,” Margarita said, already on the run.

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Chapter Twelve

Wes got ahead of Margarita and made it down the stairs and to the dining room before she did. I wasn't too far behind him. When we got there, Josie stood just inside the doorway, clutching her lantern against her chest. She pointed to where a figure lay sprawled on the dining room floor. Even in the candlelight, I could see that it was Valerie.

Wes took Josie's lantern from her and went to kneel beside Valerie. He checked for a pulse and breathed an audible sigh of relief. "She's alive," he said.

"What happened?" I asked, my voice shaking more than I'd have liked. I'd assumed that Laurence's murder had been targeted, since he was a terrible person, but an attack on Valerie suggested that we all might be at risk.

"Hard to say, but it looks like she's coming around. Her breathing and pulse are strong and steady, and she's stirring."

The thunder of footsteps on the stairs told me the others had also heard Josie's scream. Doug was at the head of the group and was at Valerie's side in a moment. They might have fought constantly, but he looked genuinely concerned.

Brent wasn't too far behind him. "Is she okay?" he asked.

"She's alive and waking up," Wes said. "I need everyone to stand back."

"It's the ghost!" Sirena cried out.

"I'm not reading any supernatural activity here," Quentin said.

"Of course not. It's gone now," Sirena said. She added ominously, "We should consider this a warning."

Brent went over to his bags. “Hey, it looks like someone’s been digging in my stuff,” he said. “I doubt that was the ghost. Who was down here?”

“Might have been Valerie,” Doug said with a shrug. “She always feels like she knows best about how we should shoot things.”

“I do know best,” Valerie mumbled, her words slurring. “What happened?”

“I was going to ask you that,” Wes said, a hand on her shoulder to keep her still. “We found you lying here in the dining room. Looks like you hit your head.”

“She might have slipped and hit one of the tables,” Paige said, her voice trembling. She was probably imagining the lawsuit.

“I don’t think so,” Valerie said. “I think someone hit me.” She reached up to rub the back of her head. “It hurts here. If I’d slipped, I’d have hit the front or side of my head.”

“Okay, where was everyone?” Wes asked, standing to face the group. “Lex, Jordan, Margarita, and I were on the stairs, and the only person who came past us was Valerie, until Josie went down and found her.” He didn’t mention the back stairs, but I was sure he was considering that possibility, which meant Rick or Paige could have come downstairs without passing us.

“We were all upstairs,” Doug said. He looked around at the others, frowning. “At least, I think we were. It was dark. People were coming and going from Sirena’s room—and not around the center of the hall, in case you’re worried. I didn’t even know Valerie had gone downstairs.”

The others all glanced at each other and shrugged or shook their heads.

“So, we don’t know who might have been down here to dig through Brent’s gear or attack Valerie,” Wes said.

“A ghost is the only rational possibility,” Sirena said. “This house has seen a lot of evil.”

Doug turned toward Brent, saw that he wasn’t shooting, cleared

his throat, and when he caught Brent's eye, he mimed holding a camera. It took Brent a moment to catch on before he raised the camera and nodded to Doug. Doug then rushed to Valerie's side, elbowing Wes out of the way and kneeling beside her. "Are you okay?" he asked, his voice rough with emotion as he clutched her hand.

"I'm fine, really," she said. "There's no need to fuss over me." She started to sit up, swooned, and sank back, but Doug caught her. I couldn't tell if it was for real or for the camera.

"We should probably move her somewhere more comfortable," Doug said. "Up to her room?"

"No!" Valerie protested. "I don't want to be alone."

"We can put her on a sofa in the parlor," Paige said. "I'll get some blankets. The linen cabinet is behind the downstairs bathroom."

"I'll go with you," Rick said. "I don't think any of us should be alone right now."

"Lex and Jordan, you go with them, too," Wes suggested. "I'd like to keep any groups a bit larger for the time being." If he wanted to keep Rick from being alone with anyone, I suspected that meant he'd had the same thoughts I had about someone using the back stairs. I didn't think Paige was in danger from her husband, but you never knew what someone who'd already killed might do, and if they were in on it together, they might take this as an opportunity to sneak out. Meanwhile, I thought it was a good sign that Wes was willing to trust Jordan that much. Maybe their relationship had turned a corner.

When we returned from the closet at the back of the downstairs hall, Doug was emerging from the dining room, carrying Valerie in his arms like a groom carrying his bride across the threshold, Brent filming as they crossed the foyer. Their fans were going to eat this up. Paige hurried to drape a blanket over one of the parlor sofas, then after Doug laid Valerie gently on the sofa, Paige tucked another blanket around her. Rick settled a pillow under her head.

"Now, you rest," Doug said, placing his hand on the top of her head like he was giving her a blessing. Their fans were going to love this episode.

"I think there's one thing this incident tells us," Kelly said. "Laurence's murder wasn't personal. Valerie is part of a different show and they had no real connection."

"Unless Laurence's murder was personal and Valerie was attacked because she learned something," Carole said.

"But I didn't learn anything," Valerie said, her voice sounding a lot stronger.

"The killer might have feared you were about to," Carole said.

"It is interesting that one person from each show was attacked," Quentin said.

"Could have been payback," Doug suggested, glaring at Quentin. "That is, if someone from Laurence's show thought someone from our show did it."

"Or it could have been someone who had a beef with both of us, like a competitor," Quentin said, turning to face Carole and Sirena.

"They were both upstairs, alone, when Laurence was killed," Doug said, leaving Valerie's side and making sure Brent was recording this.

"We all heard Sirena chanting during the time Valerie was attacked, so we know she was upstairs," Kelly said. She, Quentin, and Doug turned to face Carole.

"I suppose I had issues with Laurence," Carole said. "But then, everyone did." To Kelly, she added, almost gently, "I'm sorry. I know you loved him, but you have to admit that he could be a nasty person. Was there anyone here he didn't try to undermine or extort? I know he delighted in trying to prove me wrong and make me look bad, even though there was little point. My readership and your audience have very little overlap. It made no difference to me what he did. He merely did it to be petty. I don't pay enough attention to what Sirena writes or to your show to know if he did

the same thing to Sirena, but I'm sure he did." She turned to Sirena. "Didn't he?"

"I believe the Spooky Squad occasionally came to different conclusions than I did, but that is only to be expected of people who don't have the same degree of sensitivity to the spirits. And the spirits don't appear to everyone. They bless some with their presence." Sirena raised her chin defiantly and added, "I merely considered their so-called debunking of my reports to be proof that they weren't as genuine as I was."

"Laurence would never do anything like that deliberately," Kelly said. "Our reports were always entirely genuine, based on our own experiences and on science." She turned to Quentin for confirmation. "Right?"

Quentin shifted uncomfortably. "Well . . . he did sometimes change our conclusion in editing. Or he'd tell me what I was supposed to find before we got to a place."

"No," she said, shaking her head. "He wasn't like that."

"He was. I'm sorry."

"And you went along with it? Why didn't you say something to me? We outnumbered him."

"Would you have been willing to listen to me?" Quentin's voice became firmer. "You'd have said I was jealous of Laurence and trying to undermine him."

"No," Kelly said, shaking her head, though she sounded like she was trying to convince herself. "Laurence wasn't like that."

"I know that Laurence sometimes tried to extort property owners to get a more favorable report," Carole went on. "Had he yet said anything to you?" she asked Rick and Paige.

"He did not!" Kelly protested.

"He hadn't made any demands, but he'd mentioned that it would be bad for us if he proved our inn wasn't haunted," Paige said.

"I've heard from a number of other inn and restaurant owners who had similar stories," Carole said.

“He tried to undermine us, too,” Doug said. “I think he was gunning for our slot on the network. When he did an episode debunking what we found, he’d send the link to the network executives.”

“Sounds like you had a motive to kill Laurence,” Kelly said. “And aren’t you and Valerie each other’s alibis? Maybe you were in on it together and you were afraid she was going to talk.”

“Okay, now you’re getting ludicrous,” Doug said.

Wes approached Doug and said softly, “Can I have a word in the library?”

“You’re actually listening to this nonsense?” Doug asked, outraged. “I had nothing to do with either Laurence’s death or Valerie’s attack.”

“I want to know what you might know, and it sounds like you might know something. We can do this here or in private.”

“Alone?”

“If it makes you feel better, we can have Lex in there. She’s tougher than she looks, so she might be able to fend me off if I decide to attack you, or buy us time if the killer attacks both of us.” I couldn’t tell how serious he was about that. I’d managed to hold my own in a fight or two, but I was hardly going to be able to save anyone from a determined killer.

“Okay, sure, whatever,” Doug said with a shrug. He turned to give Valerie a pat on the shoulder before heading toward the library. I followed alongside Wes.

In the library, Doug took a seat on the sofa and leaned back, slouching comfortably, as though he was in his own living room, watching TV, rather than being interviewed as part of an investigation. His air of gentle concern was totally gone. “So, what do you need to know, officer?” he asked. “I’ve already told you I was upstairs with the others when Val was attacked, and I was in here with Val when Laurence was killed. And we just aired all the bad feelings and dirty laundry among the ghost-hunting journalistic community. Is there anything else you need to know?”

“Do you have any idea why Valerie came downstairs?”

“Nope. As I said before, I didn’t even know she did. She probably got hungry. All she ate at dinner was vegetables. Her eating habits change considerably when no one is watching her, so she probably thought she could grab some enchiladas and cheese dip while everyone else was upstairs.”

“Can you think of why anyone here might want to hurt her?”

“Slap her, maybe—that would be anyone who’s actually met her. Conk her on the head, not really. I mean, maybe one of the Spooky Squad might have thought that getting Val out of the way might get them our slot. Laurence might have done it. But I think the remaining two are very different from him, and they have other things on their minds right now.”

“Did you know any of the other guests before you came here?”

“Yeah, we’ve crossed paths with Carole, Sirena, and the Spooky Squad at events like this and we’ve run into the Spooky Squad at the occasional comics convention.”

“Comics convention?” Wes asked.

“They’re not just about comic books anymore. It’s pretty much all of pop culture: movies, TV, web stuff, books, games. TV shows about haunted houses have a decent fan base at those events, so they bring us in. It’s a pretty sweet deal. They pay for our travel, and then we get to charge for autographs and photos with fans. There’s a guaranteed minimum we make from that, and the event makes it up if we don’t hit it, but we usually make a lot more, since we can charge something like twenty bucks for an autograph. And in the meantime, we get to promote the show. We’ve been on a few panel discussions with the Spooky Squad.”

“What do you think about them?” I asked.

“Quentin’s pretty cool. I’ve never really talked much with Kelly. And let’s just say that Laurence’s persona was pretty consistent. What you saw here was what you got.” Addressing Wes, he added, “You never met him, but he was a real jerk, acted like some kind of lord of the manor abusing the serfs. That was the way he treated

convention staff, too. They tended not to get asked back to the same event. He's a decade younger than I am, but he acts like he came up with the idea of filming yourself checking out haunted places. I was watching shows like that when I was in high school. But he seemed to think everyone but him was a fraud."

"Based on what was said out there, he was the real fraud," I said.

"Oh yeah, it was pretty widely known that he was shaking people down or basing his reports on spite. We can't get away with that sort of thing, since we answer to a network. But I guess there are no constraints when you work for yourself. Maybe some of the sponsors might have stepped in if they'd been tipped off, or the platforms they used might have suspended their accounts, but I suspect the argument would have been that if you believe a show about finding ghosts, that's your own problem. To be honest, I don't know if there's even anything genuine in what they do, if they ever actually find a ghost, for real." With a snort, he leaned back against the sofa and added, "Not that there's anything genuine in what any of us do."

"You're not a believer, I take it," I said.

He shot a look at me, then said to Wes, "I don't mind being honest with the police, but I don't want this going in the newspaper."

"Off the record, then," I said. "Not that it would make much difference what I wrote in a small-town weekly newspaper."

"Okay, then, it's all a fake. I try to keep an open mind, but everything we do on the show is pure acting. Well, until tonight. I don't know what's going on in this place. As I told Lexie earlier, I was a TV reporter. Then I got laid off when the station got bought out and they downsized. I looked good on camera, so I tried going into acting. I got this job because I could shoot my own stuff if I had to and I could make it all sound real. The whole thing is basically an improv exercise. We get into character, then I think of something I 'see' and react to it. Val plays along and improvises

her own reactions. It's not really about the ghosts, anyway. The viewers are watching to see us interact, to see if we'll ever get together." He laughed. "And they're gonna be waiting a long time because that's never gonna happen. At least, not offscreen. Onscreen, it'll always be a near miss."

"You and Valerie don't get along?" Wes asked.

"You've seen us—or did you get here after the worst of the latest argument? We're like oil and water. She takes all this a lot more seriously than I do. Not the ghosts, though I think she's a little more open to that sort of thing than I am, despite the skeptic role she plays on the show. But she's hoping this job is going to make her career as a serious actress. Me, I wouldn't mind getting to host some other reality show or a game show, or something like that. I'd be great at interviewing aspiring singers."

"Do you know of anyone who'd want to hurt Laurence?"

"Everyone who ever met him? I don't see how those other two put up with him. Dude had lots of enemies, but none of the worst were here. I'd guess a lot of inn and hotel owners might have it in for him, but they're not here, unless they organized and set something up with the owners here. This whole party might have been a trap. Ooh, that's an idea. I'll have to write that one up. I'm working on screenplays. I might as well branch out, and it's possible that this job could get me a foot in the door."

"Did you hear or see anything that might have had anything to do with Laurence's death?"

"Sorry, no. I was too busy getting yelled at by Val. She seemed to think that I personally arranged for the network to hire some random guy to shoot this event for us and caused the storm to hit to delay him."

"And you can't think of any reason for anyone to attack Valerie?"

"Well, Brent, and I wouldn't blame him. She's been on his case since he got here, and nothing's good enough for her. If he hadn't been upstairs with us, I'd have thought she criticized him one time

too many, but then that would have been more of a slap or a punch in the jaw than sneaking up behind her.”

“You’re sure he was upstairs the whole time?”

“Well, yeah. You said he didn’t come past you. But I really didn’t see anyone. Once some of us got into the hall, it was dark there. I wasn’t watching him that whole time, but I don’t think I saw him go anywhere. It got confusing once Sirena got others to join in chanting to bring the ghost there.”

“Brent’s not very professional, is he?” I said.

“Believe it or not, we’ve had worse. He at least showed up with real gear. There was one time when the network lined up a local guy who showed up with his phone. We might as well have hired a teen girl from Instagram.” He shrugged. “Though, to be honest, you never would have been able to tell from the product. He did decent work. There are news guys who shoot their stories on phones these days. Anyway, we’ve had better and we’ve had worse, and none of them please Val. Brent’s actually dealing pretty well with her. I think he’s just a little stunned by the situation he found himself in. He wasn’t expecting to land in the middle of a murder investigation, storm, power outage, and possibly even actual ghosts.”

“Okay, thanks,” Wes said with a nod. Doug got up and headed back to Valerie.

“What do you think?” Wes asked me softly when Doug was gone.

“Oh, I don’t know . . .” I hedged. “But I do know I should write this down in my diary. Have you ever actually asked for my input before? Aren’t you usually telling me to stay out of it?”

“You think Rick did it, and you don’t want it to be him.”

I groaned. “Yes. He’s got a motive, he had opportunity. He could even have gone down the back stairs and hit Valerie and then made it back up without anyone noticing. The idea that other inn owners conspired to set this up may not even be that far-fetched. But while I can see why he might have felt compelled to

kill Laurence, I can't think of why he'd hurt Valerie."

"She must have learned something he didn't want her to know. Maybe she saw him coming out of the kitchen and she learned about the back stairs."

"Jordan knows about the back stairs, and surely he'd know Jordan would have told us."

"Jordan never told me."

"He must have assumed I'd tell you," I said with a shrug. "But say she did see him, why not kill her? Would he have counted on her not seeing him or not remembering what she'd discovered?"

"Besides, how could he have hit her from behind when she saw him coming out of the kitchen?"

"Wait a second, did you change sides in this argument? Was this supposed to trick me into changing my side so you'd catch me agreeing with you? I've seen those cartoons, so that trick won't work."

"I'm looking at the problem from all angles. I don't have a position on this. Doug really doesn't know who hit her."

"Did you think he did?"

"The person closest to the victim is statistically highly likely to be the perpetrator, so I wanted to rule it out. Is there a chance a ghost did it? If it could move tables, it might be able to knock someone out."

"You didn't pick up any guilt from the group?"

"No one thought anything like 'I hit her.' The killer did have a smug 'No one has any idea it's me' thought."

"I don't know how accurate Quentin's ghost finder is. I think he's actually been seeing the resident ghost and uses his device to explain it. He hasn't picked up the ghost that likes to fling things around."

As though I'd summoned it, the curtains in the room billowed and the fire flared up.

"If he's like you, then, he's not seeing anything, either, with that entity. So it remains a possibility."

“We’d better get back in there,” I said, gesturing with my head toward the parlor. “There’s no telling how much trouble that bunch could be getting into left unsupervised for so long.”

“This is rather like herding cats.”

Since he seemed to be in a good mood, and this was probably my last chance to be alone with him for a while, I said, “How are you doing after that scene with Jordan? You okay?”

“Nothing really changed. I knew it all along.”

“Being able to read minds must make relationships difficult.”

“I don’t mind the white lies. I do mind the betrayals.”

“He apologized.”

“Yeah.”

“And it was a long time ago.”

“Don’t go friendship matchmaking. I’ll figure things out. But first I’d like to survive the haunted murder house.”

We stepped into the parlor and into what looked like might turn into another crime scene.

Chapter Thirteen

“**Y**ou just couldn’t wait to tell the police all your lies about Laurence,” Kelly was shouting at Doug.

“Hey, wait a second,” Valerie said, pushing herself up on one elbow. “Everyone knew about Laurence, except maybe you.”

“Yeah, come on, Kelly,” Quentin said. “You’re just lashing out because you’re hurt.”

She whirled and shoved him hard with both hands against his chest. “I notice you went along with his schemes. He didn’t know how to edit. You could have stopped him.”

“You’re right. I could have. I should have. I didn’t know what was up for a long time, though. I didn’t know why he wanted me to make changes. I thought it was just to make a better show, and I agreed with him that we shouldn’t always find a ghost. That makes it more suspenseful. It’s only been recently that I started to see the pattern, and then someone at a haunted restaurant said something to me. I guess he thought I was in on it with Laurence. That was when I knew for certain. And after that, I did start refusing to edit things the wrong way. I’ve been thinking about quitting, but I like this gig too much. I don’t want to get a real job.”

She gave him a long, hard look. “Did you kill Laurence so you could take over the Spooky Squad?”

“What? No! Do you really think I could do something like that?”

“I wish I didn’t think that, but you’re the only one who makes sense.” She was crying now, ugly crying, with her nose running and her eyes swollen. She turned her back to him, and he stood

still, staring at her, his eyes suspiciously shiny. My heart went out to him, but I thought he deserved better than someone who was willing to believe the worst of him. That was one thing that always bugged me in those cheesy cable movies I was addicted to, when there was a misunderstanding and one member of the couple jumped to the worst conclusion about the other, then all was forgiven when the truth came out, with no mention of how the one person felt about being falsely accused by the other. If my boyfriend thought I was a murderer, I was not going to be okay with him when he wanted to get back with me after the truth came out. I figure a murder accusation is a deal breaker.

Kelly spun around and pointed at Carole and Sirena. "Or maybe it was you two. You wanted revenge."

"You know I wasn't downstairs when Valerie was hurt," Sirena said.

"Maybe you're working together. You killed Laurence together and Carole attacked Valerie when she learned the truth."

"As though I'd work with her," Carole said with a sniff.

"I didn't learn any truth," Valerie said. "I have no idea who killed Laurence." But she was giving Doug the side-eye. Did she suspect him?

I wasn't the only one who caught her look. "Hey," Doug protested. "Do you really think I'd have killed Laurence? And if I was going to hit you, you'd be facing me and have the chance to hit back. You're more likely to be the one hitting me first."

He whirled on Rick and Paige. "Have you talked to them, officer? It sounds to me like they have a good motive, since Laurence was going to shake them down or give them a bad report."

"How could a bad report possibly be worse than a murder here?" Paige said. "I'm not sure we can survive one of our guests dying during our grand-opening event. We're ruined before we even opened, and there's little chance of us being able to sell this place. It's starting to look like it's more cursed than haunted." Her

voice broke and her shoulders shook as she sobbed. Her husband went to put his arm around her, but she shook her head and walked away to sit in one of the wing chairs near the fireplace.

"I don't think a bad report from the Spooky Squad would have affected the people we'd most like to have as guests," Rick said.

"And what, exactly, do you mean by that?" Kelly asked, her arms crossed over her chest.

"We're more likely to attract older people who might also like to visit a scenic small town with art galleries. Like Carole's readers."

It looked like someone was going to have to play peacemaker here before we tore ourselves apart, and since I was a neutral party, it looked like it would have to be me. I stepped forward and said, "Okay, everyone needs to just calm down and stop attacking each other."

"Calm down? One of us is a killer," Kelly shrieked.

"And I've already been attacked," Valerie added.

"But accusing each other isn't helping," I said.

"Unless it helps us find the killer," Valerie said.

Doug made sure Brent's camera was facing him, then spoke. "The way I see it, we've got two separate mysteries going on," He addressed the group but was mostly speaking to the camera. I'd forgotten about the camera. I hoped it hadn't been on me when I was speaking. "One, who killed Laurence? That could have been a ghost or could have been a person. And, two, what kind of haunting is going on in this house? We've all seen some events that I can't explain. Things have been moving without anyone touching them."

"Other than the wind," Jordan muttered.

"Did the wind move that table upstairs while we were all downstairs?" Doug asked him. "I know you're the tech guy, but there are some things that science just can't explain." I figured that having Jordan Randall guest starring on an episode was quite a coup for Doug and Valerie. Though I wondered if there was some

sort of release form we should have signed to appear. This wasn't a public event where we could expect to find ourselves on television. "Or do you have an explanation for the table?"

Jordan shrugged.

"Okay, then," Doug said. "Let's just say there's a ghost. If the ghost killed Laurence, then it's a malevolent spirit and we could all be in danger. If not, the two cases may be entirely unrelated, but we're still all in danger because that means there's a killer among us."

"What about me?" Valerie asked. "Is that a third mystery?"

"My guess is that your attack is a subset of either of those two mysteries. It could have something to do with Laurence's murder or it could be related to the haunting. Are you sure you didn't see anything before you were attacked?"

I glanced at Wes, who sighed and shook his head, but he made no effort to stop it. I wondered if he was getting anything out of all this discussion. It surely was making the guilty party think about the crime. Unfortunately, Wes couldn't tell which person was thinking.

"I'm not sure the resident ghost is hostile," Quentin said. "I'm not getting that kind of energy from it. I don't think it even knows we're here."

"What about the poltergeist?" Sirena asked. "It seems to know we're here. It may be hostile, or it may be trying to communicate."

"It had the chance during the séance," Kelly said, "but all it did was throw things around. It may not even care about what's going on here."

"Throwing things around may be how it's communicating," Sirena said. "It might not have been able to speak to us another way."

"It's a pity we don't have a Ouija board," Margarita said. "Or would it just have thrown it?"

"I didn't bring one with me because I can usually communicate more directly," Sirena said.

Kelly turned to Rick. "You say this sort of thing happened before here? The stuff moving around?"

"Yeah, the workmen reported all kinds of strange goings on," Rick said. "Their tools went missing, sometimes reappearing later. Sometimes the bathrooms would be all wet, like someone had turned on the shower just for fun. Pieces of the workers' lunches would disappear." In the candlelight, with firelight creating dancing shadows on the walls, his recitation had the air of a ghost story told around a campfire.

"A hungry ghost?" Jordan asked skeptically.

"It may have been a prank," Sirena said. "It would take something that mattered to the people, something that would be most likely to annoy them, even if the spirit had no use for it."

"Did it ever hurt anyone?" Doug asked.

"I don't know. Most of that was before we owned the place," Rick said. "It was the former owners who did most of the renovations and ended up selling the house when they ran out of people willing to work on it. They told us about the missing tools and lunches, but didn't say anything about people being injured. We also had the missing things and saw the wet bathrooms."

"So it may be teasing us rather than trying to communicate," Doug said. "I imagine that a bunch of people trying to do a séance must be really amusing for a ghost."

The candles flared, dimmed, and returned to their usual level as the curtains fluttered.

"Maybe it is trying to communicate," Sirena said.

"That was a draft," Jordan said. "I felt it."

I'd felt something cold, like the way I felt when Jean got too close to me, but I still hadn't seen a ghost. Or it could have been a draft. It also felt like I was sitting too close to the air conditioner vents and the cold air was spilling down my neck. But I didn't think a draft had moved that table upstairs, and I knew we'd all been downstairs when that had happened. It would certainly make things nice and tidy if the ghost was the killer. Then none of these

people would be guilty. I didn't want to think any of us, even the ones I found somewhat annoying, could have committed murder. On the other hand, if ghosts could kill, that would change a lot about how I saw the world. The idea of hordes of invisible potential killers out there was terrifying.

"Yo, spirit, this is not the time to punk us," Quentin called out.

"Are you trying to tell us something?" Sirena asked. "Please, communicate with us. Tell us what you know."

A loud thud came from upstairs.

"It answered me!" Sirena said, her face aglow with ecstasy. I wondered just how accurate Carole's assessment of her was, if she was really that self-deluded or if she knew on some level that she was faking everything. If she really believed she communicated with spirits all the time, then this shouldn't be anything out of the ordinary.

"From what I understand, one of the people who died in this house lost his family during a storm like this," Sirena said. "He was left orphaned when his parents drowned on a flooded road. He may be hurt and angry, reliving that pain. Or he could be warning us not to get on the road so we don't share his family's fate."

"By trying to scare us out of this house?" Jordan asked. "That makes no sense."

There was another bang from upstairs.

"That sounds like the balcony door flew open," Rick said. "That happens a lot in the wind."

"I know I bolted it when I was up there earlier," Wes said.

"It happens even with the bolt," Rick said. "The door doesn't seem to fit too well. When it's wet, the wood in the door and the frame swells, so door doesn't sit properly in the frame. It feels like you're bolting it, but the bolt doesn't actually go in."

I didn't think Wes bought that explanation. I wasn't sure I did, either. I'd lived in a place where the door didn't shut properly and the wind could blow it open, but it was more likely to stick on a wet day. It was on cold, dry days when the door was more likely to

open on its own. I supposed it depended on how the door in question worked.

The next bang from upstairs most definitely was not the door. Something hit the floor, it sounded like.

All eyes in the room went toward the ceiling, but before Wes had a chance to stop the stampede, they were all off, running upstairs. Even Valerie got off the sofa and went with them. “Nobody touch anything up there!” Wes shouted as he came after the group.

“You aren’t curious?” Margarita asked Jordan, who remained in the parlor.

“I’m not gullible,” he said.

“You don’t mind being alone down here?” Josie asked him.

“While everyone else is up there, I’m perfectly safe,” he said.

I joined in out of curiosity, leaving with Margarita. Upstairs, the door was open and flapping in the wind. The latest thud seemed to have been caused by one of the chairs falling over. “Those chairs are heavy,” Doug said. “The wind didn’t blow it over. Like it didn’t move that table.”

Quentin stared at the readout on his gizmo. “I don’t get it,” he said. “I’m not picking up any spectral energy around here.”

Wes tapped me on the shoulder and raised a questioning eyebrow, but I shook my head. I wasn’t seeing anything at all. As far as I could tell, there was no ghost.

Rick closed and bolted the door, then moved the nearest chair over to lean against it. “Maybe that’ll hold it,” he said.

“Spirit, I sense you’re trying to tell us something,” Sirena said, moving in front of Brent’s camera. “Are you trying to warn us? Tell us who the killer is? Do you want us to get out, or do you want us to stay?”

“It would probably be easier if you asked one question at a time,” Carole remarked.

A loud moan echoed through the upstairs, sounding like a person in pain. I couldn’t help but jump, and I instinctively

reached for Wes. He caught me and held me against him. I wasn't quite sure if he was comforting me or drawing comfort from me. Maybe both.

Meanwhile, all the intrepid ghost hunters fled, screaming, toward the stairs. It seemed there were some things that were too much, even for them. It was one thing to think you were hunting ghosts but not actually seeing anything, and another thing entirely to actually encounter something right out of your nightmares. I wanted to join them, but Wes held me tight. "Wait," he whispered.

As soon as the others were out of sight, he kept one arm around me as he guided me toward the secret stairs. He must have been paying attention earlier because he got the door open in one try. I thought I heard footsteps echoing from below. Wes called out, "Jordan, not cool."

"That was Jordan?" I asked.

"I recognized his voice. He probably couldn't resist." He grinned ever so slightly. "And I have to admit that I don't entirely blame him."

"That explains the moan, but we still don't know who moved the furniture. And you didn't see the stuff that happened during the séance."

"You think it really is a ghost?"

"I think it's something."

A soft moan echoed through the stairwell, different from the earlier one. Wes and I were already pretty close together in the tight confines of the passage, but I pressed closer to him as that sound sent chills down my spine. "What is it?" he asked.

"You didn't hear it?"

"Hear what?"

"A moan, but it was different from the one before. Fainter, and it sounded like it was a struggle to get the sound out."

"I didn't hear anything but you gasping."

I probably should have moved away from him, but it was pitch dark, and that sound had been unnerving. I needed the closeness

and comfort to ground me. "Then it probably is a ghost," I said.

"Maybe it is trying to communicate. You should see if you can talk to it."

"As I said, this isn't like any ghost I've dealt with. I can't communicate with something that isn't talking back."

"You don't want to do this, do you?"

"Not really."

"Don't you want to know who the killer is? You talk to ghosts all the time."

"But not around professional ghost hunters. You see what they're all like. That's not me. I'm the real reporter here, remember? What if I end up in their reports, having a conversation with thin air and claiming to have talked to a ghost who told me who the murderer was? I could pretty much wave good-bye to my career the way it is. "

"In this town? A pretty good chunk of the population will believe you."

"And what about the rest? If I lose my credibility, it'll kill the newspaper. I'll end up having to write columns like Carole's and having real reporters sneering or laughing at me. Carole used to be a regular reporter. Doug was a journalist. That's my future if I become known for talking to ghosts." It was possible that I was getting a little hysterical, but that's what a murder, a haunting, and a storm will do to you.

"I'm not expecting you to have a public séance. You can try talking to the ghost on your own. No one but me has to know."

"What good will it do, then? It's not as though we can do anything based on the information I get. No one will believe you suddenly know who the killer is without you explaining it and, even then, I'm not sure anyone would believe it. It might affect the case."

"Do you want someone else to get hurt?"

"Playing the guilt card, are we?" And what I really hated was that it was working. "Okay, I may as well give it a go," I said with

a sigh. “But where? They’re likely to be back up here in a moment.”

He edged closer to the door, pulling me with him, and both of us held our breath as we listened. “I’m not hearing anything,” he whispered.

We left the stairway, pushing the panel closed behind us. The balcony door flew open, knocking the chair over, then closed itself.

“It looks to me like this ghost is trying to get our attention,” Wes said. “What do you know about what might be haunting this house?”

“Well, there’s the girl I’ve seen in the parlor. I suspect she’s from that family that was murdered by a drifter here in the thirties.” The curtains fluttered. I wondered if that was meant as a yes. “Then there was the kid whose parents were washed away in a flash flood—it must have been a storm like the one today. He stayed on in the house, I guess with his guardian until he grew up, and Jean said he died young here. He was kind of a recluse, and by the time they found him, it was too late to tell whether he’d killed himself or if something else had happened.”

A lantern someone must have dropped in the panic lit up, then went out. I couldn’t tell if that was meant to be a no or a yes. “There are those who believed that this ghost was what made the drifter kill the family.” The lantern came on again.

“Can a ghost even make a person do something? Like, possess them, or something like that?”

“I have no idea. I haven’t seen it happen yet, but as I’ve already said, this ghost is pretty unusual.” The curtains fluttered.

“I take it you’re in here with us,” I said. The curtains moved vigorously. “You’ve been trying to tell us something.” The curtains moved again. “Did you kill Laurence?” The lantern came on. “Okay, we’ve got yes and no. I guess we could play twenty questions. Do you know who killed Laurence?” The curtains moved. “Is it someone who’s in this house tonight?” Another curtain flutter. I sighed in frustration. “This is going to take all

night, and I'm way out of the habit of asking yes-or-no questions. That's terrible in journalism. You want to ask leading questions to get people to talk."

"Don't look at me," Wes said. "I like getting people to talk, too. I only use yes-or-no questions when I'm forcing someone to give me a straight answer instead of talking around an issue. Like, 'Did you commit this crime?'"

Addressing the ghost, I said, "This would be a lot easier if you could use your words. I could hear them. I talk to ghosts all the time. You've probably been alone way too long, and it seems like you've concentrated your energy on being able to affect the physical world so you can get people's attention. I'm sure it took a lot out of you to move the furniture. But if you could just try to talk to me, it would really help."

The room grew colder, as though all the energy in it was being sucked out. There was a brief flare of light from the lantern, the curtains billowed, and then everything went still.

Chapter Fourteen

A faint shimmer formed ahead of us, near the balcony doors. It flickered and tried to take form before dissolving. It re-formed and gradually solidified. Though “solidified” was overstating things significantly. The ghost was the barest hint of an image, entirely transparent. I thought it looked like a young man in a loose white shirt, though that may have been my imagination adding detail.

I tried to remember the name Jean had mentioned when she told me about the incident in this house’s past. Maybe hearing his name would help him take form. “Arthur?” I guessed.

“What is it? Is he here?” Wes whispered.

I motioned for him to hush. I didn’t want to scare the ghost away. The shape seemed to be growing clearer. Now I was sure it was a young man. He looked painfully thin, but I couldn’t tell if that was how he really looked or if that was because he couldn’t make a larger form.

“Arthur, yes, that was it,” came the merest whisper. “I was Arthur.” The sound seemed to drift on a breeze rather than coming from the ghost.

“I know this must be difficult for you, Arthur,” I said, moving toward him. “This night must be like all your worst nightmares of everything bad that happened to you or that you witnessed. There’s a storm and floods like when your parents died and you were left alone, and then someone was murdered in your house, like when the family who lived here later was killed.”

“I tried to stop him,” he said, shaking his head. “I did everything I could, but I couldn’t do anything.” The curtains

billowed behind him, reflecting his agitation. "He killed her. He killed Dotty, and I couldn't save her. By the time I could make anything move, it was too late. She was already dead. But I scared him away. He ran away and didn't come back."

I noticed that he didn't mention the parents. Had he been in love with the girl who'd lived here after his death? Now they were haunting the house together. I wondered if they were able to interact at all. "You scared him right into the arms of the police," I said. "They caught him."

"I wasn't able to come back after that. I never could make her see me. She's here, and she doesn't know I'm here." Which answered my mental question. How sad, to be trapped for eternity with your crush and never be able to say or do anything about it.

And that in no way paralleled my situation. Wes and I were both alive, and I had no intention of being trapped here for all eternity with him. Which meant we needed to figure out who the killer was before he could attack anyone else.

"Did you see who killed the man tonight or who attacked the woman?"

"I couldn't stop him, either. I knocked him over, but it was too late."

"I know. But you tried. And you've been trying to warn us, haven't you?"

"I did everything to get your attention, but you didn't understand me."

"That's why I'm talking to you now. You can help protect the rest of us if you can tell me who it was. Did the same person commit both attacks?"

He was growing fainter, like he was running out of steam. I was afraid he'd vanish before he told me anything useful, but he blurted, "It was the man who lives in the house!" and then he disappeared, as though he'd used all his energy to identify the killer.

I stood there, stunned. I'd known Rick was a prime suspect

because he had a motive, he'd possibly had the opportunity, and he likely had the physical ability to kill. Even his wife seemed to think he might have done it. But having it confirmed was a real blow. I *liked* Rick.

"Lex, what is it? What did he say?" Wes asked me, placing a hand on my arm.

"He said it's the man who lives in the house."

"Rick?"

"I don't think he knows anyone's names."

"See if you can get a description from him."

"He's gone. Just saying that much took a lot out of him."

He frowned. "Can you get him back? I can't confront anyone on the basis of something cryptic a ghost told you, not without knowing more details."

I wasn't optimistic, but I gave it a shot. "Arthur? I need to know more. Can you tell us what the man looked like? If you can't appear and talk to me, we can go back to yes-or-no questions." The curtains didn't so much as flutter, and the lantern remained dark. "Nothing," I reported to Wes. "You haven't had a chance to be alone with Rick yet. You need to find an excuse so you can read him. Do that before you confront him."

"The trick will be to do it without making him suspicious that I'm on to him."

"He can't know that you're reading minds. That's not a thing most cops do. But I agree that it could be risky if he figures out that you're suspicious, even if he doesn't know why you're suspicious."

"I don't get the impression that he's a bad guy. He must have been acting to protect his business. It might even have been self-defense."

I shook my head. "My read on Rick was that he was the kind of guy who'd have stood up and admitted it if it had been an accident or self-defense. And it's hard to think of a way that knocking someone on the head in the attic was self-defense. Then there's

Valerie.” I shook my head. “I can’t make it add up.”

“He doesn’t strike me as the kind of person who’d sneak around and lie,” he agreed. “But I’ve known a lot of criminals who hid their true natures very well. I should talk to him and see if I can get him to come clean. Then things will go better for him. At the very least, I can read him, so I’ll have a better idea.”

“Good idea. Let’s go find him.” I started to head for the stairs, but he caught my arm.

“Hold on, I think this is one I should tackle alone.”

“One-on-one with the guy we have very good reason to believe is a killer?”

“I’ve got a gun.”

“He was in the army.”

“That doesn’t necessarily mean he knows how to kill an armed man with his bare hands.”

“Still, what was all that about not being alone with anyone, and you’re going to deliberately go be alone with the guy we actually suspect?”

“I’m hoping that he’ll be more likely to own up if a reporter’s not there. And do you think you’d make that much difference if it came to a confrontation? I can take care of myself.”

“You know, if I announced plans to do this sort of thing, you’d tell me I was being stupid or crazy. You got mad at me about accidentally confronting killers alone when I didn’t know they were killers and I didn’t plan to confront them alone.”

“The difference is, you’re not a cop. When you confront a killer, you’re getting in the way of me doing my job.”

“This is out of your jurisdiction.”

“I’m still a cop. I’d like to handle this quietly, maybe lock him up in his own apartment until the county guys can get here and deal with it. That will keep the rest of us safe tonight, so maybe we can get some sleep. I’ll stay within earshot of everyone else.”

“Okay, then,” I said grudgingly, though it wasn’t as though he had to get my permission to do anything.

“How about I bring Brent with me for backup? Since he wasn’t here when the murder happened, I won’t have to worry about reading the wrong thing from the wrong person, and Brent may be skinny, but he looks like he can take care of himself.”

“Or there’s Jordan,” I suggested. “You know him, and you’ve got to be sure he didn’t do it.”

“Yeah, and I also know he wouldn’t be of much use if there was trouble, unless he’s gained a lot of fighting skills since high school, which seems unlikely. If I want someone to hack into someone’s computer, I’ll call Jordan, but he’s not my backup of choice if things might get physical.”

“Okay then, Brent it is,” I said, nodding. “But be careful.”

“Of course. Now we’d better get downstairs. They’re probably wondering what became of us.”

“Or they’re killing each other.”

“Yet another reason why we need to confirm who the killer is so they’ll stop turning on each other.”

We were about halfway down the stairs when we ran into Carole on her way up. “Oh, there you are,” she said. “I didn’t see you downstairs, so I thought I’d check. Did you find out what was making that sound?”

I’d totally forgotten about the sound. It had only been a few minutes ago, but a lot had happened since then. I let Wes take the question since he was the one who’d figured out that Jordan was messing with us.

“It seemed to be the wind through a gap under one of the doors,” Wes said. I had to resist the urge to turn and gape at him. Was he actually covering for Jordan? Maybe he was finally getting over the grudge.

“Mmm hmmm,” she said, flicking me a look that struck me as somewhat ominous, but that was probably because of the way the lantern she held lit her face from below. A chill rushed through my body at the thought that she might have seen anything that had happened earlier. I hoped she merely assumed Wes and I had been

making out upstairs.

“Don’t worry, I don’t think the others noticed you were missing,” she added as she turned to head back down the stairs. “They got sidetracked by wandering around the house, filming themselves looking for a ghost.”

Wes and I exchanged amused glances before following her. We reached the parlor and found Jordan, Margarita, and Josie sitting by the fireplace. Jordan’s guilty flinch when Wes entered told me that Wes’s guess about the source of that moan had been accurate. Josie’s giggle suggested he’d already told Margarita and Josie about the prank.

“The others are all in the library, pretending to be scared,” Margarita reported.

“Pretending?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she replied with a shrug. “There’s been some spooky stuff, but none of it seems to be happening now, so I think this is just for the sake of their shows.”

“Did Valerie go with them?” Wes asked. “I don’t think she should be up and around. I’d better go check.” He headed to the library, and I wondered what excuse he’d come up with to steal Brent away with Rick.

I knew he wanted me to stay out of it, but I couldn’t resist edging closer to the door. I got there just in time to overhear him say to Rick, “There’s something I want to check out upstairs, but I’d like you to be present as the owner.” There was a buzz of the others demanding to be in on it, which abruptly hushed. Then Wes said, “Brent can come, too, and shoot it, and he’ll make the footage available to everyone if anything happens, okay? Otherwise, the fewer people, the better.”

I was dying to find out what happened, but I knew I might ruin it if I tried to go along. I needed chocolate to settle my nerves, so I went back to where my local friends were sitting, only to find the cookies gone. “No more cookies?” I asked plaintively.

“Paige took them back to the dining room,” Margarita said.

“She put some wrap over them so they wouldn’t dry out.”

I saw Wes heading up the stairs with Rick and Brent as I crossed the foyer to the dining room. I pulled back the wrap on a tray sitting on one of the tables and took a cookie. As I nibbled nervously on it, I looked around the room, wondering what Valerie might have seen in there that would have made someone want to knock her out. The only thing I’d been able to think of was that she’d seen someone come through the kitchen door. Otherwise, all that was in the room, other than food, was Brent’s gear. I might be willing to commit violence over Margarita’s enchiladas, but only if I had to fight someone for the last serving. The food couldn’t possibly explain the attack on Valerie. It must have been the gear.

I wandered over to look at those bags. One had been left partially unzipped. I glanced around, making sure no one was watching me, then bent over, holding my lantern to illuminate the bag’s interior. I didn’t recognize a lot of the stuff in there, but there was one of the headsets like Quentin got out of his bag in his room. I wondered why Brent wasn’t using that. It would be a lot easier to go up and down the stairs while wearing that than while carrying around a camera. The sound quality might be different, I guessed. I didn’t know if this camera would be compatible with the mike packs Doug and Valerie wore. I started to turn away, but something caught my eye. I bent over and saw that there was a decal of the Spooky Squad logo, like on the side of their van, on the headband.

I didn’t know if Quentin still had his headset or if he might have put it down, but why would it have ended up in Brent’s bag? Or could this be that other headset that Laurence seemed to have taken that I didn’t find with him in the attic? There was something fishy about this, but I wasn’t sure what could be going on. Brent had arrived after Laurence had died, hadn’t he? Could he have arrived sooner, and we didn’t notice? Had the truck been there when Jordan’s car alarm had gone off? Would we have seen it in the heavy rain?

I took a lantern, opened the front door and looked out. I was pretty sure the white SUV hadn't been there when we were out on the porch looking for Laurence. I was surprised to see that the rain had finally stopped. I turned off the lantern, stepped outside and looked up once I was off the porch. The sky was beginning to clear, with stars appearing between the remaining wisps of clouds. There were a lot more stars visible in Stirling Mills than there had been in Dallas, and there were even more out here, with no lights at all. I took a deep breath of the cool, damp night air and wished I had a cup of hot tea. That was all I needed to make this peaceful moment perfect. Well, that and there not being a murderer in the house behind me.

A muffled noise disturbed the peace. The ghost again? Or something else? But if I wasn't mistaken, it hadn't come from the house. I stood still, holding my breath, listening, until the noise came again. It was coming from where the cars were parked.

I turned on the lantern and hopped between puddles out to the cars. I crouched on the ground to look under the vehicles, but didn't see anything. Jordan's car was empty, as was Wes's police SUV. The noise came again, and it seemed to be coming from the white SUV I assumed was Brent's. It also became clearer. It sounded like someone shouting, "Help!"

The truck's windows were slightly fogged, so I didn't have a clear view inside, but I thought it looked like there was a person lying in the back. I hesitated, worried that this could be a trick or a trap. Had the killer tried to escape and accidentally got himself locked in the truck? But the voice sounded more and more frantic. I couldn't ignore the cries for help. I tried the latch on the rear hatch, and it opened, which turned on the light in the rear compartment, illuminating a man in jeans and a white T-shirt with his hands zip tied behind his back. A large wrench lay next to him. "Oh, thank God," the man said. "I thought no one would ever hear me."

"Who are you?" I asked. "What are you doing out here?"

“My name’s Brent Brown. I’m a freelance cameraman here to shoot a show for *Spectral Search*, but I’ve been tied up back here. I’m losing feeling in my hands and my legs are going numb. Do you think you could cut through these zip ties? There’s a multi-tool in the toolbox under the back seat. I’ve been trying to get to it, without any luck.”

I thought it was unlikely that the killer would have accidentally zip tied himself, so I went around and opened the back door. While I searched for the toolbox, I asked, “What happened?”

“It took me forever to find this place, with the storm and the roads being closed. A guy came out when I got here, and I thought he worked for the inn. I told him who I was and what had happened.”

I found the tool and came around to the back, then climbed into the truck so I could reach him. He continued his story as I cut the ties. “He took one of my bags for me, and when I reached inside to get the other one, he must have clubbed me from behind with something. I wasn’t stunned for too long, but when I came to, my shirt was gone and I was zip tied.”

“Scruffy, skinny guy, blondish?” I asked.

“I think so, but it was pouring, so it was hard to tell. He had some kind of light rig on his head, which made it hard for me to make out his face.”

“Then who is he?”

“He doesn’t work at the inn?”

“No.” Rick and Paige had never mentioned any other staff, and I hadn’t seen anyone. But then it struck me—all those reports about things going missing, including lunches, and bathrooms left wet. A ghost didn’t need a sandwich or a shower, but a person would. Arthur had said it was the man who lived in the house. We’d assumed that meant Rick, the owner. But Rick didn’t actually live in the house. He’d have been there often, but would Arthur have known he was the owner if he didn’t sleep in the house at night?

Could there have been someone living in the attic all that time, stealing things from the work crews and using the showers at night when no one was there? It wasn't squirrels or raccoons in the attic. It had been a person. Laurence must have discovered him when he checked the attic. Arthur had been trying to point to "Brent" all along. I remembered that the flaring candles had followed him around the table. I'd thought the cameraman was following them, but maybe it had been the other way around.

The killer might have planned to steal a car—which could be why Jordan's alarm had gone off—and then Brent had arrived, providing a convenient escape vehicle that was easier than breaking into a Tesla. He must have planned to carjack Brent to make his escape, only to learn that the roads were closed, so he was stuck. The next best thing was to take Brent's place and pretend to be the cameraman. Since he hadn't been there at the time of the killing, he'd be above suspicion, and he'd have a safe, dry place to wait until he could get away. I guessed that he'd taken Laurence's headset to light his way outside. That must have been the light Kelly saw. I wondered if he'd forgotten he had that incriminating evidence still with him and had shoved it in one of Brent's bags as he approached the house. He'd been awfully worried about Doug and Valerie seeing inside those bags. He must have been afraid Valerie would see the headset when he caught her downstairs.

And Wes was with the killer now, thinking the killer was the one person in the group who was entirely above suspicion.

Chapter Fifteen

“Wes!” I yelped and scrambled out of the truck.

“Hey, wait!” Brent called after me. “What’s going on?”

With a groan, I turned back. “Can you walk?”

He scooted to the edge of the tailgate, rubbing his wrists. “I think so.”

“Then go inside and tell them who you are and what happened. The guy who attacked you killed someone—you were lucky he just knocked you out and tied you up—and impersonated you, so they think he’s the one person who *couldn’t* have killed that guy. And that means my friend trusts him and may be alone with him.”

I didn’t wait for a response before I turned and ran back to the inn, making no effort to dodge the puddles this time. As I ran, I thought, “Wes! It’s Brent! Be careful!” I didn’t know if I could make him hear me, but he’d heard my mental cry for help once before when I hadn’t even known I was doing it, so I knew he could hear me when I wanted to be heard.

I was already out of breath when I reached the house, so when I paused in the foyer to enlist the help of Jordan, Margarita, and Josie, I had to gasp between words. “It’s . . . Brent, well . . . not . . . really . . . Brent. Explain . . . later. Wes . . . needs . . . help . . . come on!” I didn’t know if I made any sense at all, but they jumped up and came with me as I ran up the stairs.

I was just below the top step when I nearly ran into Fake Brent, whoever he really was, on his way down. “Hey, what’s up?” he asked, sounding perfectly calm and casual.

“Where’s Wes?” I demanded.

“The officer? I don’t know. He and Rick—that’s the guy who owns the place, right?—went out to the garage for something.” He dropped his voice and said conspiratorially, “I got the feeling the officer suspected Rick and was getting him someplace private to question him.”

That was possible, given the fact that it had been the plan. Except that the plan was to have Fake Brent there as backup so Wes wasn’t questioning Rick alone. I already knew that everything about Fake Brent was a lie, so was he lying now, or had Wes changed the plan and gone off to question Rick alone? It didn’t look like Fake Brent had any idea I knew about him. I didn’t have a great track record for not letting on to a killer that I was on to him, but I gave it a shot. “Oh, okay,” I said, as casually as I could manage while I wrestled with the dilemma of what to do. Obviously, I needed to keep the killer from getting away or hurting anyone else, but I was also worried about Wes. Had he really taken Rick to the garage, or was something else going on?

“Wes isn’t upstairs?” Jordan asked, also sounding rather casual. I didn’t know if he was doing a good job of faking it or if he hadn’t caught my earlier babbling.

“No. I think they’re in the garage or the apartment out there, like I said,” Fake Brent said, taking another step down the stairs.

I decided that my priority had to be containing him. There was no telling what he might get up to while I was looking for Wes. With the rain stopped, he might even try to get away. I needed to herd him to a place without an easy escape route. On the stairs, he had a straight shot to the front door, or he could run up and over to the back stairs. The library was the best bet, I decided. If we could block the door to the foyer and the door to the parlor, we could keep him in there, and it was where most of the others were.

“Valerie and Doug were looking for you,” I said. “I was coming to get you if Wes didn’t need you anymore. They’re in the library.”

I thought a flicker of annoyance crossed his face, but it could have been my imagination, seeing everything about him as evil

now. Annoyance was a perfectly rational response to Valerie. “Then I guess duty calls,” he said, heading down the stairs. I stepped aside to let him pass, then fell into step beside him. Jordan moved to his other side, and Margarita and Josie stayed behind him. My heart was pounding so loudly that I was sure everyone around me could hear it, but the killer showed no sign that he realized anything might be wrong. We reached the bottom of the stairs, and it looked like we were home free. We just needed to get him to the parlor, and from there it would be easy to drive him to the library.

We’d taken two steps toward the parlor when the front door opened and Real Brent entered. “Thanks for taking off and leaving me,” he said. Then he saw Fake Brent and said, “Hey, it’s that guy!”

Fake Brent realized the gig was up, gave me a shove, and bolted for the door. Real Brent blocked his way. He still wasn’t too steady on his feet, but he was bigger than Fake Brent, so he made a good human barricade. Jordan threw himself on Fake Brent. It wasn’t the best tackle I’d ever seen, but I thought he did better than Wes had given him credit for. Margarita and Josie started yelling for help, and I hoped the others would get to us in time.

Fake Brent put up a good fight. He was desperate, so he fought with a fury. He flung Jordan aside and knocked Real Brent away. I was on my feet again, but I didn’t think I could catch him before he got to the door. I heard footsteps in the hall, but they wouldn’t reach us in time. “Arthur, help!” I called out. I didn’t know if the ghost was still around or had the energy to do anything after he’d manifested to me, but it was worth a try since I couldn’t think of anything else to do.

The door slammed shut just before Fake Brent reached it. That slowed him enough that the others were able to get to us from where they’d been in the library. “He’s the killer!” I shouted, pointing at Fake Brent. “He’s an impostor who posed as your cameraman. This is the real Brent.” I pointed to the guy who’d

caught Fake Brent in a headlock.

“But he didn’t get here until after the murder,” Valerie said.

“Brent didn’t. This guy has been here all along,” I said. “I think this is the ‘ghost’ that’s been living in the attic, stealing people’s lunches, and using the showers.”

“So it *wasn’t* one of us, after all!” Paige said, her face lighting up with joy and relief. I hoped her husband never found out she’d suspected him of the murder.

“There was no ghost?” Sirena said, sounding like she might cry.

“Not in the attic, as I tried to tell you,” Carole said smugly.

“You mean, all this time we had a fake photographer?” Valerie said.

“I’ve been tied up in my truck after this guy clobbered me on the head,” Real Brent said. “I’ve got zip ties in my bag if someone wants to help me restrain him.”

Doug went to the dining room and came back with ties like the killer had used on the cameraman. Real Brent and Doug got the killer’s wrists secured and marched him to the parlor, away from the front door.

“Where’s the officer?” Quentin asked. “Shouldn’t he be doing this?”

That was the question. Where was Wes?

I left the others in the parlor and headed for the stairs, but before I got a few steps up, Rick came in from the kitchen. “Where have you been?” I demanded, whirling to face him and rushing down the stairs. “Where’s Wes?”

He frowned, not understanding my urgency. “Wes sent me to get some tools from my apartment,” he said, hefting a toolbox.

“That idiot,” I muttered. Wes must have figured out it was Fake Brent once he was alone with Rick and the impostor, so he sent Rick away for safety instead of keeping someone around for backup.

“Huh?”

“Nothing. But you missed the excitement. We caught the killer.”

“You did what?”

I gestured toward the parlor. “He’s in there. The others will explain.” Without waiting for his response, I ran up the stairs, calling for Wes, terrified I’d find him on the floor up there, his head bashed in. I held on to the hope that the killer hadn’t had the wrench he must have used to kill Laurence with him, since he’d left it out in the truck with Brent. But if Wes was okay, how could he not have heard all the commotion earlier?

There was no one upstairs. The hall was completely empty, and all the doors were shut. I glanced up at the attic hatch. If that was where Fake Brent had been living all this time, he might have stashed Wes up there with Laurence’s body.

Or there was the back staircase. Someone who’d lived in this house for months might have discovered it, and it would explain a lot. The killer had been able to escape that way after killing Laurence, then must have gone around to the front, using Laurence’s headset. He must have also used the back stairs to see what Valerie was looking at downstairs, and had feared she’d find the headset he’d stashed in a bag.

I moved toward the secret panel, hoping my worst fears wouldn’t be realized. I’d thought we’d have plenty of time to work things out, but I hadn’t considered that I could lose him already. He had to be okay. The panel popped open when I pushed on it, and I gasped when I saw a head with tousled reddish hair lying against the top step. “Oh, no. Oh, honey, please be okay,” I murmured as I knelt beside him. “We never even got a chance to go out.” Holding my breath, I reached to check for a pulse, but he stirred and moaned as soon as I touched him. “Wes!” I said, joy bringing tears to my eyes.

“Lex?” he mumbled.

“You’re alive!”

“More or less. What happened? Are you crying?”

I got myself under control and probably overcorrected from concern to annoyance. “You sent your backup away, like an idiot,”

I said.

He started to sit up, but couldn't get any leverage because his hands were zip tied behind his back. The killer must have been carrying around those ties, which made me wonder what his plans for all of us had been. "Brent's the killer!" he said. "You've got to warn the others."

"Way ahead of you. I found the real cameraman in his truck. The fake is zip tied in the parlor. Do you have a knife?"

"On my belt."

I had to go down a few steps to reach his belt, and in the close confines of the stairwell, that meant lying alongside him. Under other circumstances, I might have enjoyed the intimacy more. I found his pocket knife, then had to get into an even more interesting position, rolling him over and straddling his legs, to reach his wrists and cut him free. I got off him, found steady footing on one of the steps, and helped him crawl out of the stairwell. "What happened to you?" I asked as he leaned back against the wall in the hall.

"I heard two thoughts as we went up the stairs and I talked about wondering who the killer was. One was thinking, rather smugly, that I'd never guess he did it. The other felt responsible. It matched the expression on Rick's face, and I couldn't think of why Brent would feel responsible. I needed to be sure, since it didn't make any sense, so I sent Rick on an errand to give me a chance to read Brent. Brent must have hit me from behind."

"That seems to be his go-to move. He got Laurence, then he did the same thing to Val and to the real Brent."

"But I don't get it. He didn't arrive until after the murder."

"I think he was here all along, living in the attic."

"So, that was the ghost. Well, one of them. And that's what your ghost meant about the man who lived here."

"Are you okay?"

"Just a bit woozy, but I'll be fine. I wasn't totally out. I need to call this in."

I let him lean on me as we went out to the balcony, where he called the county constable. I couldn't make out anything from his side of the conversation. He just said things like, "Really?" after he gave his report. When he ended the call, he said, "There was an escape from a prison transport van not far from here months ago. That may be who this is."

"I remember that," I said. "I ran a story. They were telling people to keep their doors locked and look out for hitchhikers."

"I helped with the search. They ended the search in this area and figured he was long gone by now. This guy might fit the description. He must have found himself an empty house to hide in and lived off lunches he stole from the workers. I guess Laurence found him when he went into the attic."

"You didn't recognize a guy on the most-wanted list?"

"Hey, neither did you, and you ran a story. But he looked different, and I wasn't thinking about him. Like I said, we thought he was long gone. No one imagined he'd have stuck around in this area. The constables should be here soon. The main road seems to be open now."

We went inside and headed down the stairs and into the parlor, where Wes went to stand looming over the killer. "Well, Lucas Jarret, we seem to have found you," he said. The guy's flinch told me that we had, indeed, found the escapee. Wes told the story about who he was.

"And he's been in our attic all this time," Rick said, shaking his head. "To think, the former owners sold the place to us for a song because they were afraid it was haunted, when it was just some guy hiding out here. I almost feel bad about taking their money."

"Oh, I assure you, the house is haunted," Carole said.

"Yeah, my gear backs that up," Quentin agreed.

"Your resident spirits aren't that malevolent," Carole said.

"I confess, I was that moan you heard," Jordan said.

"The house is still haunted," Quentin said. "Most ghosts are actually pretty quiet. They're energy, more than anything else."

“Speaking of energy,” Carole said with a yawn, “now that we know who our killer is, can we go to our rooms and get some rest? This is far later than I usually stay awake.”

“I think that’ll be fine,” Wes said.

“We have some shooting to do, since we have a real cameraman now,” Doug said.

“But stay out of the upstairs hall,” Wes warned. “That’s still a crime scene.”

My eyelids were growing heavy, as well, but now that I’d solved the case, I needed to put on my reporter hat, so I had to stay awake until the constables arrived. I was just wishing I could get a cup of hot tea when the lights came back on. Perfect timing! “Do you have a teakettle?” I asked Paige.

THE CONSTABLES ARRIVED ABOUT HALF an hour later and warned that it would be safest for us to wait until daylight to drive to Stirling Mills because there was still enough water over the roads to make driving hazardous in the dark. Once they’d taken Lucas away, those of us who didn’t have rooms made do on the couches in the parlor and library. As tired as I was, I couldn’t shut off my brain for long, so I was already awake and in the kitchen, boiling a kettle, when Rick and Paige came in to make breakfast. “I’m glad we’ve got power again,” he said. “That’ll make breakfast a lot easier.”

“I just hope nothing spoiled,” Paige said, checking the refrigerator. “We didn’t open the refrigerator door other than to put some ice packs from the freezer in there.” She took out a milk jug, opened it, sniffed, and said, “Seems okay. We were lucky.”

Carole was the first one to come downstairs, and she came upon me, sitting on the front porch and drinking tea. “You don’t have to be afraid of your gift,” she said, sitting beside me on the porch swing.

“Gift?”

“I saw you talking to the ghost.”

I started to deny it, but realized there was no point. “Oh, that.”

“I have a similar gift.”

“I suspected you were the real deal. I’m not afraid of my gift. I work for a ghost. I just didn’t want to come across like, well, that.” I waved my hand in the general direction of the upstairs, where all the ghost hunters still slept.

“Or me? I went through most of my career as a perfectly ordinary reporter. You don’t have to be like those others if you don’t want to. I chose to write this column because it’s fun. Your secret is safe with me. Nobody got anything on camera.”

“I guess it helped that the *Spectral Search* people didn’t have a real cameraman for most of the time.”

“Even if they had noticed your abilities, they wouldn’t have let you upstage them.”

Wes joined us next, looking deliciously rumpled. Carole gave me a sly wink and slipped away. “I never did thank you for coming to my rescue,” he said, taking the seat Carole had just vacated.

“No, you didn’t. Your grandmother would be ashamed of you.”

“Well, thank you.”

“You’re quite welcome. I couldn’t let Lucas add to his body count with you.”

He sipped his coffee. “This seems like a nice enough place. Without the ghosts, it might be a bit romantic, though I can’t imagine coming to this part of the world for a romantic getaway. Or is that just because I live around here? Maybe someone from a city would like the peace and quiet.”

A little thrill went through me when he talked about a romantic getaway. I felt like we’d been circling around that possibility for months without making any progress. There was a definite spark between us, unless I was totally delusional and it was entirely one-sided. He’d neatly sidestepped the few subtle efforts I’d made to suggest we take things to the next level, but I couldn’t tell if he was clueless, not interested, or holding back for some reason. We did have to deal with each other on a professional level, and it might

not look good for someone being groomed to be the next police chief to be too cozy with the town's newspaper editor.

Circumstances had conspired to throw us together in a potentially romantic setting with plenty of candlelight, overnight, during a storm. We'd had a good embrace or two, but had that just been the moment, or had there been any feeling behind it? I knew what I'd felt when he was missing, which had clarified my feelings about him. "I'm glad you were here," I said.

"So am I. I was worried about you."

"You came out here because of me?" I asked.

"Maybe a bit," he said, taking a sip of coffee, which kept him from looking directly at me.

"Well, thanks." I tried to think of a witty, flippant remark, but I was drawing a blank. I went for sincerity. "I was really worried when you were missing. Are you sure you're okay?"

"Not even a headache this morning. Though I suspect I'll need a nap this afternoon. I'm not normally a night owl."

There was silence between us, punctuated by the squeaking of the swing chains, then he grinned and said, "Now, what was that you said when you found me?"

"You were awake?"

"Just enough to hear you call me 'honey.'"

My face felt like it was going to catch on fire. "Oh."

"And I liked it. I thought you found me irritating."

"I thought *you* found *me* irritating."

"I can do that and still like you."

"So, now what?" I asked, wondering if he was going to bring up what I'd said about us not having gone out yet.

"Breakfast, I think."

"Good idea."

He stood and helped me off the swing. Before we got to the front door, he said, "And we'll figure out what else later."

"Okay," I said. I was glad to defer the discussion because I wanted to be fully awake and alert when it happened. I was most

definitely not at my best.

I was surprised when Jordan joined Wes and me at a table for breakfast, and Wes didn't say anything or get up to leave. There had been progress all around, it seemed. "Crazy party," Jordan said.

"You don't think all this will hurt the inn, do you?" I asked.

"Well, even if people decide it might not have been haunted, after all, it should become a magnet for the true crime fans. I'll have to talk to Rick and Paige about contacting some podcasters. The escaped prisoner hiding in the attic of a house he thought was abandoned but that was being turned into an inn around him makes for a great story."

"It's definitely going to be on my front page," I said.

"By the way, who is Arthur?"

"Who?" I asked, trying to look innocent.

"I thought—Never mind. I must have misheard you."

I glanced up and saw the ghostly girl coming down the stairs to the parlor. A moment later, the form of a young man appeared and approached her. She looked shyly up at him. I smiled at the thought that something good seemed to have come out of the harrowing night.

LEXIE'S ADVENTURES will continue soon.

TO FIND out when the next book is available and receive an exclusive short story about the history of Stirling Mills, [sign up for the Shanna Swendson mailing list](#).

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About the Author

SHANNA SWENDSON earned a journalism degree from the University of Texas and used to work in public relations but decided it was more fun to make up the people she wrote about, so now she's a full-time novelist. She lives in Irving, Texas, with several hardy houseplants and too many books to fit on the shelves.

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